THE SPECIMEN CASE

ERNEST BRAMAH

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By the Same Author

THE EYES OF MAX CARRADOS
THE WALLET OF KAI LUNG
KAI LUNG'S GOLDEN HOURS

The SPECIMEN CASE

BY ERNEST BRAMAH

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THE SPECIMEN CASE
— A —
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PREFACE

A COLLECTION of twenty-one stories which bridge, in the process of their writing, thirty years of life, might be expected to offer at least the element of variety. How far the present volume succeeds or fails in this respect I am not just now concerned in arguing, but the occasion has reminded me . . .

When I was very young (how young, the reader may gather from the context) I was for some time possessed by one definite ambition: to have to my credit a single example of every kind of literary exercise. To anticipate repeating any of these facile achievements would seem to have held no charm, and at this flight of time I am far from being certain what the youth who is now so dim a shadow in memory's background would have included in his quaint and ingenuous assemblage. But there were to be, I am sure, an historical romance; a psychological study; a "shilling shocker" (as it was then called); an intensely pathetic book (*Misunderstood* was doubtless still being spoken of); an epic (or was the thing I meant called a saga, I wondered?); something quite unlike anything that had ever been written before; a classic (I have already pleaded infancy); a "best seller" (but that distressing cliché was as yet uncoined); a novel showing my intimate knowledge of the world, women, and sin in general; one of each kind of play; and, if I may drop my voice a *Punch* joke, a prize *Tit-Bit,* and a *Family Herald Supplement.*

I suppose it is credible that at that age (whatever it may have been) abnormal reticence should go hand in hand with appalling candour. We must have talked; otherwise how should I have known that Batget (since become wealthy as a lard importer) made a practice of rising an hour before he need each day, solely to avoid encountering a rejected manuscript at the domestic breakfast table? I must have talked; otherwise how should Melwish have known anything of these callow aspirations?

Melwish was the enigma of our genial gatherings. Middle-aged, successful and clear-cut, he appeared to find some interest in the society of the young, the impecunious and the half-baked. We knew that he was a prolific fiction writer; indeed it was ususual to pick up a magazine of a sort that did not contain one of his unsophisticated little love stories; and we wondered how on earth he did it—not in the writing but the marketing thereof. So simple, so sheerly artless was he both in matter and in manner as to give rise to the occasional heresy that there really must be something in them after all or no one would accept his stuff. But on the whole we classed it as pretty hopeless tripe, although we did not fail to congratulate Melwish whenever the occasion fitly offered. Our own efforts lay in the direction of originality and something better than the editors were used to: Lang's *How to Fail in Literature* had obviously reached us then, but Leonard Merrick's *Cynthia* certainly had not. Melwish took it all quietly and easily; he was essentially a listener and gave nothing in return—except a rescuing donation when the state of the society's funds urgently required it.

How it came about I have long ago forgotten, but one night I found myself walking with Melwish down the Strand. Possibly I had been speaking of his work; more

probably of my own. In any case he would have been the listener.

At the corner of one of the southward streets he stopped; my way lay up Chancery Lane, so that we seemed to be on the point of parting.

"Where do you dig?" he suddenly asked, detaining me. "Are you in any hurry?"

"Up in Bloomsbury," I replied, with just the discreet touch of ambiguity. "No, it doesn't matter what time I get there. Why?"

"Do you care to see my place?" he asked. "You might have a drop of something to carry you along."

This unexpected offer was rather exciting in its way. Generous enough after his own fashion, Melwish did not incline towards private hospitality; even the quarter of London he homed in was a matter of occasional speculation. He alone among us possessed a club address.

"I should be delighted if it's not troubling you," I replied—we were always rather on our company manners with this seasoned adult. "I had no idea that you lived anywhere round here."

"I don't; it's only a workroom that I have. . . . I suppose," he added thoughtfully, "you really wonder that my particular sort of sludge should require any particular place to turn it out in? I expect you youngsters guy it pretty well when I'm not there."

This made matters rather easier, as I could be virtuously indignant.

"I bet we jolly well wish we could do half as well," I exclaimed, possibly with a mental reservation that I spoke financially. "We only wonder that you should ever think it worth while to come among us."

We had reached Melwish's outer door. He turned in the act of opening it to face me as he spoke.

"I go," he said dryly, "to hear you fellows talk." A whole diatribe could not have expressed more.

The workroom proved to be a very comfortably-appointed study, reached through a little ante-room, furnished as a hall. Everything proclaimed the occupant's success in life. Melwish lit the gas-fire and pulled up an easy-chair for me. While he engaged himself with spirit-lamp and glasses I looked frankly about the room. An illustrated interview was among the things I meant to do, and I speculated whether my host's standing would carry it. At all events there would be no harm in laying a foundation.

"Do you find it necessary to sit on any particular chair or to adopt any especial position while you write?" I inquired, apropos of the room at large. These intriguing details always bulked in an interview with an author in those days.

"My dear lad," he replied tolerantly, "I haven't the least doubt that I could write equally well if I stood on my head all the time."

"Then you have no pet superstition or favourite mascot that you rely on?" I persisted.

"No," he grunted, conveying the impression that he thought I was talking hectic nonsense; and then I saw him pause and think, and turning down the spirit-lamp for a moment he came across to me.

"Yes, I have, by Jupiter," he admitted slowly. "I was forgetting that. You see the inkstand there? Well, I have the strongest possible conviction that in order to keep my work what is termed 'up to magazine standard,' I must write from that.

"This is jolly interesting," I said—the interview promised to be fashioning. "May I look at it?" Melwish nodded and went back to the brew.

Without doubt it was worth inspecting—in a way. It

was absolutely the ugliest inkpot that I had ever seen, and it was probably the most inconvenient. Its owner pointed out, later on, that in order to fill it one had to use a funnel, and that when filled it was difficult, except by way of a pen, to get the ink out again; but he was mistaken in this, for I got a considerable amount out on to my grey trousers quite easily. It was extremely top-heavy, very liable to catch passing objects, and would be unusually intricate in cleaning. All this was accounted for by the fact that it had been fashioned by a "craftsman."

So much for its qualities. In shape it was modelled as a turnip. It was, in fact, a silver turnip. A few straggling leaves sprouted from the crown and an attenuated root got into the way beneath. A hinged lid towards the top disclosed the ink-well and the whole thing stood on three incongruous feet. Before I had done with it I discovered an inscription across the front, and lifting it (hence the contretemps) I read the single line of inconspicuous script:

Remember the Man with the Hoe.

"Jolly fine thing," I remarked, when I had admired it sufficiently. "I don't wonder that you are fond of it."

"I'm not," he said. "The damned thing would be an eyesore in a pig-sty. All the same it has served its purpose. Yes, B., every ounce of my success I owe to that incredible abortion."

"Go on!" I exclaimed. The interview was positively creaming.

Melwish added the last touch to the concocting of the drinks and indicated mine—possibly one was slightly less potent than the other.

"I've used that metallurgic atrocity for nearly twenty

years now, four days a week, six hours a day, and not a soul on earth knows why. But I'm going to tell you, B., because you talk like a—well, something in the way I did myself at about your age."

"Good," I contributed to encourage him; and not to overdo it I said no more.

"When I was about your age," he continued, "I was doing pretty much as you are, and with about the same result. Then going along the Edgware Road late one starry night, with Swift walking on one side of me and Defoe upon the other, I suddenly got an inspiration for a masterpiece. I expect you know how they come—all at once clean into your head without any making up on your part."

"Why, yes," I admitted, in some surprise, "but I didn't know that—that anyone else——"

"Everyone," he retorted bluntly. "This idea involved a full-length book, such as would take me at least two years to write. I ruminated on it for the next few months and it grew spontaneously in the usual way. Then I began the writing, did the opening chapters, and stuck hopelessly.

"I saw at once what the matter was. Summer had come and I couldn't get on with the thing here in London. It needed space and solitude. I had a few pounds to spare; I packed up and went off into the country, intending to stay at some cottage for a couple of months and come back with the difficulties surmounted and the whole line in trim.

"I got my room easily enough and settled down there at once, but of course I could hardly expect to do anything the first night—the light was poor and the place so damn quiet that you had to listen to it. The next morning I set out to take the manuscript off into the fields and get it going there. It was a simple matter to find a

field-path, but I had to go a considerable distance to get the exact spot I fancied. Then I discovered that it was too hot and brilliant in the sun and not quite pleasant out of it. There were more distractions of one sort and another than you would have credited; in the end I fell asleep, thinking out some detail of the plot, and when I woke it was about time to get back for dinner.

"On my way in, the path led through a turnip-field where a venerable labourer was hoeing. In the interests of local colour I stopped to pass a few words with this ancient and to observe his system. He walked between two rows of young plants and very dexterously, considering his archaic tool, he chopped them all down with the exception of a single turnip every foot or so. He used judgment too and would let the space be a little more or a little less in order to select a particularly vigorous growth if one offered, but I saw that at least twenty young hopes must wither for the single one that grew—a saddening thought, especially at our job, B. Then, just ahead of us, I noticed an exceptionally well-grown young plant, standing by itself. It was the finest of any about, and I saw with quite a personal satisfaction that it would come at the right interval. . . . Without a pause Old Mortality chopped it down.

" 'Why, man alive!' I exclaimed, 'you've sacrificed the most promising of the lot!'

" 'Oh, aye," he replied—I won't attempt the barbarous dialect—'it was a likely enough young turnip, but don't you see, master, it was out of line with all the rest? Even it it didn't get cut off by hand sooner or later, the horse-hoe would be bound to finish it when once it came along.' And then, B., the hob-nailed philosopher uttered this profound truth: 'An ordinary plant where it's wanted has a sight more chance of coming to something than a giant where it isn't.'

"I walked on with my ideas suddenly brought out into the clear light of day, and perhaps for the first time in my life I really set before my sober judgment a definition of what I wanted to do and what were the pros and cons of ever doing it. . . . After dinner I burned the manuscript of the masterpiece, as much as I had written, and with it all the notes and jottings I had made. Then I sat down to write a short story for the magazines.

"Of course I knew well enough what sort of stories the magazines wanted. Everyone knows and in a general way everyone can write them. The line of demarcation isn't whether you can or can't, but whether you do or don't. Outside my cottage window was an orchard, and I wrote a story about two lovers who met there for the last time. She thought that she ought to give him up for some insane reason or other, and he thought that she oughtn't. They talked all round it and when, finally, he saw how noble she was and they were parting irrevocably, she suddenly threw herself into his arms and said that she couldn't, and he saw how much nobler she was. There was a dog that looked on and expressed various sympathetic emotions and so forth. There wasn't a word in it that a tram conductor couldn't have written, and from beginning to end it didn't contain a page whose removal would have made the slightest difference to the sense. It was soothing in the way that the sound of a distant circular saw, or watching an endless chain of dredging buckets at work, soothes. A reader falling asleep over the story (an extremely probable occurrence) would wake up without the faintest notion of whether he had read all of it, some of it, or none of it. I didn't even trouble to find names for the two imbeciles: they were just 'the Man' and 'the Girl.'

"It took a single afternoon to write that four-thousand-word story—of course there was no need to read it over

—and I addressed it at once to an editor whom I knew slightly. I had ample time before the mail went to stroll down to the village office and send it off. Afterwards I wrote a short, light article with the title, 'Why do Long-nosed Girls Marry Photographers?' It had to be written in the dark, but that made no difference.

"The next day I wrote the same story over again, giving the couple names this time, putting them on a romantic Cornish shore instead of in an orchard, and changing the dog into a sea-gull. I had no wish to repeat myself literally in any detail, but when you reflect that it is impossible to remember a story of that kind ten minutes after you have read it, you will see that it is unnecessary to take any especial pains to avoid some slight resemblance. As a matter of fact I have been writing that particular story at least once a month ever since.

"Three days later I heard from the editor in question. He congratulated me on having hit off their style so successfully at last. Would two guineas a thousand suit? And he hoped that I would let him see anything further in the same pleasant vein. The article was not so promptly dealt with where it went, but in due course I received notice of acceptance, subject to a trifling change of title, which would make it more attractive to the bulk of their readers. When the proof came along I noticed that it was headed, 'Why do Photographers Marry Long-nosed Girls?' "

"Well?" I prompted.

"That's all," he replied. "Except, of course,"—with a complacent look around the attractive room—"the et ceteras of life."

There were several things that I would have liked to know, especially exactly how much money he was making now, but Melwish seemed to think that he had told

his story, and, after all, there was always a certain air of detachment about the man in his attitude towards us.

"Think it over, B.," he concluded, as I rose to go a little later. "You're only a young beggar yet."

"Jolly decent of you to take the trouble," was my dutiful reply. "Still," I reminded him, "you did say that you liked to hear us young beggars talk."

"Yes," he admitted, dropping into that caustic tone of his; "but I doubt if you quite appreciate why."

Certainly I have wondered about that once or twice since.

He came down to the lower door to let me out. It had been raining in the meanwhile and a forlorn creature who was evidently sheltering for the time almost fell into our arms. He offered a box of matches in extenuation of his presence.

"No," said Melwish very sharply, "and remember what I told you about hanging round this doorway, Thompson. A wretched fellow," he explained, as the miserable being shambled off into the night; "impossible to help that sort. I put him in the way of a nice job delivering circulars once and he threw it up within a week. You'd hardly credit it, B., but that wastrel fancies his real forte is to write—verse, if you please, at that! Pretty pass we're coming to. Well, so long."

. . . . . .

There is, you will (I hope) notice, a certain system in the arrangement of this book of stories. It is not —if an author may speak more than very casually of his own work without indelicacy—intended essentially as a collection of quite the best stories I might perhaps have chosen, nor is it, I am more than sure, a collection of anything like the worst that were available; it consists rather of a suitable example taken at convenient intervals over the whole time that I have been engaged in

writing stories—a span of thirty years. In every case, therefore, the date at which the tale was written is attached—the place of writing being added merely, in the words of Mr. Finch McComas, "to round off the sentence." Each tale thus becomes a sort of milestone by which, should you happen to maintain so much interest, you can estimate your author's progress—backwards or forwards, as you may decide.

When the suggestion of this collection first arose there had already been published two volumes of what are now generally referred to as "Kai Lung" stories, and another pair of what might with more propriety be described as "Max Carrados" tales. There being no lack of other material available it seemed fitting that in this instance all stories of those two distinctive classes should be ruled out, and no doubt this would have been the plan had not, about that time, the Mystery arisen.

It is a little difficult, as the hand holds the pen, to appreciate a Mystery in relation to oneself. The nearest parallel that occurs is the case of the dentist (as described in *Punch*) who administered gas to himself preparatory to extracting one of his own teeth. Being intimately concerned, but quite unconscious of what is going on, I am therefore driven to contemporary record.

So far as I have any evidence, Mr. Edward Shanks was the first to use the fatal word. Referring to *The Wallet of Kai Lung,* he would seem to have written: "Its name was therefore passed from mouth to mouth in a mysterious way, but few people had ever seen it or knew what it was like."

If this is indeed the fount and origin of the legend the historic reference may be proved in the *Queen* of December the 2nd, 1922. It sounds harmless enough, and in any case I take the opportunity of publicly forgiving Mr. Shanks whatever may result, but Dark Forces were evi-

dently at work, for a few weeks later Mr. Grant Richards found it necessary (in the *Times Literary Supplement*) to declare: "Meanwhile I am asked all sorts of questions about the book and its author. Is there really such a person as Ernest Bramah? and so on."

The "so on" has a pleasantly speculative ring—to me, that is to say. At all events, whatever Mr. Richards had been asked, his diplomatic reference answered nothing, so that, later, he is induced to state without reserve: "Finally, I do assure his readers that such a person as Ernest Bramah does really and truly exist. I have seen and touched him." This should settle the matter, you would say? Not a bit of it. Turn to "N. G. R.-S." in the *Westminster Gazette:* "He assures us that there is such a person as Ernest Bramah. Well, there may be! I myself still believe . . ." (This break does not represent omitted matter, but "N. G. R.-S.'s" too-sinister-for-words private belief.) "Anyway, you can now buy *The Wallet* for seven-and-sixpence and form your own opinion of the reasons which keep the author of such a book so closely mysterious behind his unusual name."

And then, surely the most astonishing of all, there is Miss Rose Macaulay: Miss Macaulay the relentless precisian, so flawlessly exact that she must by now hate the phrase "hard brilliance," author of *Potterism* (in whose dedication I have never ceased to cherish an infinitesimal claim), retailing "They say" with the cheerful irresponsibility of a village gossip. "N. G. R.-S.", it will be seen, gilds the pill of innuendo with a compliment; Miss Macaulay administers a more salutary dose: "The crude, stilted, Conan Doyleish English of his detective stories certainly goes far to bear out the common theory that Mr. Bramah has a literary dual personality" (*Nation and Athenaeum*).

Finally (perhaps), to my hand as I write this Preface

there comes a letter conveying the excogitation of an American publisher, representative of a firm which has already issued three books bearing my name. Casually, quite naturally, among other mundane business details, he drops the inspiring remark: "I have always had a feeling that you were a mythical person." So, in the language of a bygone age, that's that. After all, there is something not unattractive in the idea of being a mythical person . . . though from the heroic point of view one might have wished that it could have been "a mythological personage." . . .

Should the reader, still maintaining the intellectual curiosity which I have credited to him, here exclaim, "What is all this about and why?" I can only assure him that I have not the faintest notion. He and I are equally in the dark.

Apparently, there is no simple middle way, no sheltered, obvious path. Either I am to have no existence, or I am to have decidedly too much: on the one hand banished into space as a mythical creation; on the other regarded askance as the leader of a double (literary) life. But there is one retort still left whereby to confound the non-existers and the dualists alike—I can produce both a "Kai Lung" and a "Max Carrados" between one pair of covers, and here they are.

E. B.

London, 1924.

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I

Ming Tseuen ana the Emergency

IT was the custom of Ming Tseuen to take his stand at an early hour each day in the open Market of Nang-kau, partly because he was industrious by nature and also since he had thereby occasionally found objects of inconspicuous value which others had carelessly left unprotected over-night. Enterprise such as this deserved to prosper, but so far, owing to some apathy on the part of the fostering deities, silver had only come to Ming Tseuen in dreams and gold in visions. Yet with frugality, and by acquiring the art of doing without whatever he was unable to procure, he had supported himself from the earliest time he could remember up to the age of four short of a score of years. In mind he was alert and not devoid of courage, the expression of his face mild and unconcerned, but in stature he lacked the appearance of his age, doubtless owing to the privations he had frequently endured.

Next to Ming Tseuen on the one side was the stall of Lieu, the dog-butcher, on the other that of a person who removed corroding teeth for the afflicted. This he did with his right hand while at the same time he beat upon a large iron gong with his left, so that others in a like plight who might be approaching should not be distressed by hearing anything of a not absolutely encouraging

strain. About his neck he wore a lengthy string of massive teeth to indicate his vigour and tenacity, but to Ming he privately disclosed that these were the fangs of suitable domestic animals which he had obtained to enlarge himself in the eyes of the passer-by. Ming in return told him certain things about his own traffic which were not generally understood.

Across the Way a barber was accustomed to take his stand, his neighbours being a melon-seller to the east, and to the west a caster of nativities and lucky day diviner. Also near at hand a bamboo worker plied his useful trade, an incense vendor extolled his sacred wares, a money-changer besought men to enrich themselves at his expense, and a fan-maker sang a song about the approaching heat and oppression of the day. From time to time the abrupt explosion of a firework announced the completion of an important bargain, proclaimed a ceremony, or indicated some protective rite, while the occasional passage of a high official whose rank required a chariot wider than the Way it traversed, afforded an agreeable break in the routine of those who found themselves involved. At convenient angles beggars pointed out their unsightliness to attract the benevolently inclined, story-tellers and minstrels spread their mats and raised their enticing chants, the respective merits of contending crickets engaged the interest of the speculative, and a number of ingenious contrivances offered chances that could not fail—so far as the external appearance went—to be profitable even to the inexperienced if they but persisted long enough. It will thus be seen that almost all the simpler requirements of an ordinary person could be satisfied about the spot.

Ming Tseuen's venture differed essentially from all these occupations. In Nang-kau, as elsewhere, there might be found a variety of persons—chiefly the aged

and infirm—who were suddenly inspired by a definite craving to perform a reasonable number of meritorious actions before they Passed Beyond. The mode of benevolence most esteemed consisted in preserving life or in releasing the innocent out of captivity, down even to the humblest creatures of their kind; for all the Sages and religious essayists of the past have approved these deeds of virtue as assured of celestial recognition. As it would manifestly be unwise for the aged and infirm to engage upon so ambiguous a quest haphazard—even if it did not actually bring them into conflict with the established law—those who were of Ming Tseuen's way of commerce had sought to provide an easy and mutually beneficial system by which so humane an impulse should be capable of wide and innocuous expression. This took the form of snaring alive a diversity of birds and lesser beings of the wild and offering them for sale, with a persuasive placard, attractively embellished with wise and appropriate sayings from the lips of the Philosophers, inviting those who were at all doubtful of their record in the Above World to acquire merit, while there was still time, by freeing a victim from its bondage; and so convincing were the arguments employed and so moderate the outlay involved when compared with the ultimate benefits to be received, that few who were feeling in any way unwell at the time were able to resist the allurement.

Owing to the poverty of his circumstances, Ming Tseuen was only able to furnish his stall with a few small birds of the less expensive sorts, but, to balance this deficiency, he could always traffic at a certain profit, for so devoted to his cause were the little creatures he displayed, as a result of his zealous attention to their natural wants, that when released they invariably returned after a judicious interval and took up their accus-

tomed stations within the cage again. In such a manner the mornings became evenings and the days passed into moons, but though Ming sustained existence he could add little or nothing to his store.

Among the crowd that passed along the Way there were many who stopped from time to time before Ming Tseuen's stall to admire the plumage of his company of birds or to read the notice he exposed without any real intention of benefiting by the prospect he held out, and by long practice the one concerned could immediately detect their insincerity and avoid entering into a conversation which would inevitably be wasted. Thus imperceptibly the narration leads up to the appearance of Hya, an exceptionally graceful maiden of the house of Tai, whose willowy charm is only crudely indicated by the name of Orange Blossom then already bestowed upon her. Admittedly the part she had to play in this stage of Ming Tseuen's destiny was neither intricate nor deep, but by adding to the firmness of his purpose when the emergency arose she unwittingly supplied a final wedge. No less pointed than when he first fashioned it is the retort of the shrewd Tso-yan: "Not what he is but how he became it concerns the adjudicating gods."

Orange Blossom had more than once passed the stall of Ming Tseuen before the day when they encountered, and she had paused to observe the engaging movements of the band of feathered prisoners there, but for the reason already indicated he had not turned aside from whatever task he was then engaged on to importune her. When she spoke it was as though Ming for the first time then beheld her, and thenceforward his eyes did not forsake her face while she remained.

"How comes it, keeper of the cage, that your stall is destitute of custom," she inquired melodiously; "seeing that it is by far the most delightful of them all, while less

than an arrow's flight away so gross a commerce as the baked extremities of pigs attracts a clamorous throng?"

"The explanation is twofold, gracious being," answered Ming, resolving for the future to abstain from the food she thus disparaged, though it was, indeed, his favourite dish. "In the first place it is as the destinies ordain; in the second it is still too early after daybreak for the elderly and weak to venture forth."

"Yet why should only the venerable and decrepit seek uprightness?" demanded the maiden, with a sympathetic gesture of reproach towards so illiberal an outlook. "Cannot the immature and stalwart equally aspire?"

"Your words are ropes of truth," assented Ming admiringly, "but none the less has it appropriately been written, 'At seventeen one may defy demons; at seventy he trembles merely at the smell of burning sulphur.' Doubtless, then, it is your humane purpose——?" and partly from a wish to detain so incomparable a vision, and also because there was no reason why the encounter should not at the same time assume a remunerative bend, he directed her unfathomable eyes towards that detail of the scroll where the very moderate rates at which merit could be acquired were prominently displayed.

"Alas," exclaimed Hya no less resourcefully, "she who bears the purse is by now a distance to the west. Haply some other time——"

"Perchance your venerated father or revered grandsire might be rejoiced to grasp the opportunity——" he urged, but in the meanwhile the maiden had passed beyond his voice along the Way.

Ming would have remained in a high-minded contemplation, somewhat repaid to see, if not her distant outline, at least the direction in which she would progress, but almost at once the oleose Lieu was at his elbow.

"If," remarked that earthly-souled person with a cun-

ning look, "you should happen to possess influence with the one who has just resumed her path, it might mean an appreciable stream of cash towards your threadbare sleeve. The amount of meat that she and her leisurely and opulent connection must require cannot be slight, and there is no reason why we should not secure the contract and divide the actual profit equally among us."

"So far from that being the case," replied Ming, in a markedly absent voice, "she to whom you quite gratuitously refer cannot even think of the obscene exhibits of your sordid industry without a refined shudder of polished loathing, and those of her house, though necessarily more robust, are doubtless similarly inclined. Reserve your carnivorous schemes for the gluttonous and trite, thou cloven-lipped, opaque-eyed puppy-snatcher."

Instead of directing a stream of like abuse in turn, as he might logically have done, the artless-minded Lieu flung his arms about the other's neck, and despite that one's unceasing protests embraced him repeatedly.

"Thus and thus was it with this person also, in the days of his own perfervid youth," declared the sympathetic dog-butcher when he ceased from the exertion. "She was the swan-like daughter of a lesser underling, and it was my custom to press into her expectant hand a skewer of meat when we encountered in the stress around the great door of the Temple. . . . But that was in the days before a mountain dragon altered the river's course: doubtless by now she is the mother of a prolific race of grandsons and my name and bounty are forgotten."

"There is no possible similitude between the two," declared Ming Tseuen indignantly. "The refinement of this one is so excessive that she shivers at the very thought of food, and the offer of a skewer of meat would certainly throw her into a protracted torpor."

"How can that be maintained unless you have first

made the essay?" demanded Lieu with undiminished confidence. "In these affairs it is often the least likely that respond phenomenally. Were it not that a notorious huckster is at this moment turning over my stock with widespread disparagement, I could astonish you out of the storehouse of my adventurous past. In the meanwhile, apply this salutary plaster to your rising ardour: could I have but shown five taels of silver, she whom I coveted was mine, and yet in the event she slipped hence from me; but this one of thine is by my certain information a daughter of the affluent house of Tai, and a golden chain and shackle would not bridge the space between her father's views and your own lowly station."

"Her place is set among the more brilliant stars," agreed Ming briefly. "Nevertheless," he added with a new-born note of hope, "is it not written within the Books, 'However far the heaven, the eye can reach it'?"

"Assuredly," replied Lieu, pausing in his departure to return a step, "the eye, Ming Tseuen—but not likewise the hand." And endeavouring to impart an added meaning to his words by a rapid movement of the nearer eyelid, the genial-witted dog-butcher went on his way, leaving Ming with an inward conviction that he was not a person of delicate perception or one with whom it would be well to associate too freely in the future.

It is aptly said, "After the lightning comes the thunder," and events of a momentous trend were by no means lagging behind Ming's steps that day. Even while he contended with the self-opinionated Lieu, in a distant quarter of the city a wealthy lacquer merchant, Kwok Shen by name, was seeking to shape afresh this obscure and unknown youth's immediate fate, urged by the pressing mould of his own insistent need. "It is easier for a gnat to bend a marble tower than for a man to turn destiny aside," pronounced the Venerable, the Sagacious

One, in the days when knowledge was, but how many now, in the moment of their test, acquiescently kowtow? Be that as it may, having perfected and rehearsed his crafty plans, Kwok Shen set out.

It was becoming dusk, and Ming Tseuen would shortly erect a barrier, when Kwok Shen drew near. As he approached the other glanced round, and seeing close at hand an elderly and not too vigorous merchant of the richer sort, he bowed obsequiously, for it was among these that his readiest custom lay. At the same time he recognised in Kwok Shen a stranger whom he had noticed observing him from a distance more than once on recent days, and undoubtedly this incident stirred an element of caution in his mind.

"May your ever-welcome shadow come to rest upon this ill-made stall," remarked Ming Tseuen auspiciously, and looking at him keenly Kwok Shen halted there. "It only remains for my sadly concave ears to drink in the music of your excessive orders," continued Ming. "Seven times seven felicities, esteemed."

"Greeting," replied Kwok Shen more concisely, though as an afterthought he passed the formal salutation, "Do your in-and-out taels overlap sufficiently?"

" 'A shop can be opened on pretension, but ability alone can keep it open,' " quoted Ming Tseuen in reply, although, not to create the impression of negligent prosperity, he added, "Yet the shrub one waters is ever more attractive than the forest cedar."

"Admittedly," agreed the merchant politely, for not having applied the leisure of his youth to an assimilation of the Classics, he felt himself becoming immersed in a stream beyond his depth and one that was carrying him away from the not too straightforward object of his quest. "Your literary versatility is worthy of all praise, but for the moment let us confine ourselves to the precise

if less resonant terms of commercial usage," he suggested. "Here is a piece of silver for your immediate profit. Thus our meeting cannot involve you in loss and it may quickly tend to your incredible advancement."

"Proceed, munificence, proceed," exclaimed the delighted Ming. "You speak a tongue that both the scholar and the witless can grasp at once," and he transferred the money to his inner sleeve.

"Is there about this spot a tea-house of moderate repute, one affected neither by the keepers of the stalls nor by the most successful class of traders, where we can talk unheard and at our leisure?"

"Almost within sight the tea-house of the Transitory Virtues offers what you describe. Had the invitation come from me, a somewhat less pretentious one might have been chosen, but doubtless to a person of your transparent wealth——"

"Lead on," said Kwok Shen consequentially. "The one beside you is not accustomed to divide a mouse among four guests," and having thus plainly put beyond all question that the settlement did not affect himself, Ming was content to show the way.

The conversation that ensued was necessarily a slow and dignified proceeding. Kwok Shen had so much to conceal, and Ming Tseuen had so much to learn before he knew what it was prudent to admit, that for an appreciable period their intercourse was confined to pressing an interminable succession of cups of tea upon each other. Ming, however, had the advantage of his literary abilities, which enabled him to converse for an indefinite time upon a subject without expressing himself in any way about it, while Kwok Shen laboured under the necessity of having to achieve a specific issue.

The position, as presently outlined by the merchant, stood thus at its essential angles. He was, as he de-

clared, a trader in gums and resins, and by a system of the judicious blending of his several wares at that stage his fortunes were assured. Being of an easy-going and abstemious nature, one wife alone had satisfied his needs, and she in turn had lavished all her care upon an only son, to whom the name of San had been applied. Stricken by an obscure malady this one had languished, and in spite of what every healing art could do had lately Passed Above.

Kwok Shen suitably indicated by means of his face-cloth and a discarded plate that the effect of the blow upon himself had been calamitous, but when he spoke of the despair of the lesser one of his inner chamber his voice practically ceased to have any sound attached to it. Very soon every interest in life forsook her; she sank into an unnatural langour and not even the cry of a passing comb vendor or the sound of earthenware being shattered by the household slaves moved her to action. The investigation of skilled exorcists, those who had made the malignant humours their especial lore, all tended to one end: without delay another should be found to take the lost one's place and thereby restore the immortal principles of equilibrity whose disturbance had unbalanced the afflicted mind. To this project she who was most concerned had at last agreed, stipulating, however, that the substitute should bear an exact resemblance to the departed San.

Beyond this point there could be no feasible concealment of the part that Ming Tseuen would be called upon to play, and that person's alert mind began to prepare itself for the arrangement. He had already composed the set terms of his aged father's anguish and chosen a suitable apophthegm to describe his broken-down mother's tears when the words of Kwok Shen's persuasive voice recalled him.

"At the moment of abandoning the search as hopeless, chance led this one's dejected feet into the market here. When these misguided eyes first rested on your noble outward form, for a highly involved moment it was as though some ambiguous Force must have conveyed there the one we mourned, for his living presentment seemed to stand revealed. So complicated became the emotions that this person returned home at once, unable for the time to arrange his sequences adequately. Since then he has more than once come secretly and stood apart, observing from a distance, and each occasion has added a more imperviable lacquer to the surface of his first impression. In the meanwhile, not from any want of confidence let it be freely stated, but solely in order to enlarge our knowledge of one so precious in our sight, a series of discreet inquiries have been made. Rest assured, therefore, Ming Tseuen, that everything connected with your orphaned life and necessitous circumstances is known. Lo, I have bared the recesses of my private mind; let your answering word be likewise free from guile."

"How shall the drooping lotus bargain with the sender of the rain?" replied Ming Tseuen becomingly. "I put myself implicitly within your large and open hand. . . . Any slight details of adjustment can be more suitably proposed after hearing the exact terms of your princely liberality."

By this sudden and miraculous arisement it came to pass that Ming Tseuen was at once received into Kwok Shen's sumptuously appointed house as his adopted son. No less enchanted than bewildered by the incredible resemblance was she of the inner chamber when the moment came, and together the merchant and his wife sought to mould Ming's habits to an even closer fiction of the one whose name he now assumed.

"At such a rebuke from menial lips he whom we indi-

cate unnamed was wont to extend a contumacious tongue," perchance it might on one occasion be, and, "His manner of pronouncing 'tsze' was *thus,*" upon another. All San's toys and possessions accrued to Ming's unquestioned use and he occupied the sleeping chamber of the one whose robes he daily wore. While kindly and indulgent on every other point, Kwok Shen imposed one close restraint.

"It is not seemly that a merchant having this and that to his position should be compelled to traffic for an heir among the garbage of the market stalls, though necessity, as it is said, can make a blind beggar see," observed the one concerned. "It would be still more lamentable that this abasement should be known to those around. For that reason we shall shortly go hence into another place, where our past will be obscured; meanwhile let the four outer walls of this not incommodious hovel mark the limits of your discovering feet and within them hold no word of converse with any from outside whom you chance to meet. In this respect I speak along an iron rule that shall measure the thickness of a single hair of deviation."

"Your richly mellow voice stays with me when your truly graceful form is absent on a journey," replied Ming submissively. "As the renowned Hung Wu is stated to have said——"

"He who is wanting from our midst was not prone to express himself in terms of classical analogy," corrected Kwok Shen graciously, and Ming dutifully refrained.

It was not long before Ming Tseuen had occasion to recall this charge, but as he was then in his own chamber with none other by, its obligation was not so rigorous as it might otherwise have seemed. He had drawn aside a stool that he might open a small shutter and look out, but the Way beneath was austere and void of entertain-

ment, so that he would have retired again, when one somewhat younger than himself went by, propelling along his path an empty can.

"Ae ya, image-face!" he exclaimed, seeing Ming there and stopping to regard him acrimoniously. "So thou art still among us despite the pursuing demon, art thou? Where is the kite in the form of a vampire with outstretched wings for which I bargained with thee?"

"There is no kite such as you describe, nor have I ever bargained with you for it," retorted Ming, who might require the kite for his own future use. "Further, it is not permitted that I should hold converse with another."

"There is the kite, for these deficient hands have held the cord that stayed it, and touching the bargain we together ate the bag of dragon's-eyes that were the price of its surrender. Haply you think, O crafty son of the ever two-faced house of Kwok, because you are fated shortly to Pass Hence, thus to avoid your just engagements?"

A breath of mistrust stirred certain doubts that lingered in Ming's mind. He looked east and west along the Way and saw that none approached; from the house behind no disturbing sound arose.

"What air have you lately breathed," he ventured amicably, "in that for some time past you have been absent from the city?"

"What pungent fish is this that you thus trail?" demanded the other scornfully. "Never was I beyond Nangkau since the day my mother had me. Doubtless you hope to lead my mind away from the matter of the vampire kite—may the dragon's-eyes lie cankerous on thy ill-nurtured stomach!"

"Nay, but my heart is clear of any guile," protested Ming resourcefully, "in token whereof here is a cake of

honey, freely to thy hand. Yet how comes it that you know of the destiny awaiting this untimely one?"

"Why, it is the great talk among the inner chambers of this quarter of the city, and there is much concern as to the means by which the supple paint-peddler within will strive to avert the doom."

"What do men say?" asked Ming, veiling his misgivings.

"They say little; but their lesser ones industriously supply that lack."

"And to what end?" demanded Ming more urgently.

"The general trend is that the Fates will in due course prevail," replied the one outside, speaking with an air of agreeable anticipation despite the honey cake he fed on, "for it is recalled that when the wily mastic-monger had you adopted to the Temple banyan tree, to secure for you a powerful advocate, the hostile Ones were strong enough by a lightning flash to cleave it to the ground and leave you shieldless. Glad am I, Kwok San, that for me the geomancers foretold the threefold happiness. . . . To whom will go your bow and golden arrows, O estimable San?"

"To thee, without doubt, out of deep mutual friendship," Ming made reply in haste. "Touching this fate—when is the day——"

"I cannot stay—one stronger than myself draws nigh and the fair remnant of this cake——"

"But the bow and golden arrows——"

"Another day perchance——" came back the lessening voice, and pursuing feet sped by.

Ming Tseuen replaced the shutter and sat down. A variety of noteworthy sayings from the lips of Sages of the past occurred to his retentive mind, but although many of these were of gem-like lustre, none seemed at the moment to offer him the exact solution that his posi-

tion called for. What outline that position took he was now perfectly assured—the chance encounter with that one outside had moulded vaporous doubt into a compact certainty. Kwok Shen had played a double part throughout. His son had not Passed Hence at all, but the foretellers had divined that he lived beneath the influence of some malignant spirit and that at a predicted hour its vengeance would be wrought. Driven from one protection to another, accident, in the form of his own peculiar likeness, had given into a distracted father's hand a final and decisive means to baffle its perceptions. The device was one of high classical authority and in like case Ming Tseuen would himself have hastened to adopt it, but, as the adage rightly says, "What is defence to Ho-ping is to Ping-ho defiance."

There was still time doubtless to turn his knowledge into flight; the outer door might now be barred, but he could at a stress project his body through the shutter. Truly, but what lay beyond? Everywhere Kwok Shen's bitter vengeance would pursue him and on a thousand facile pretexts could betray him to the Torments.

Nor, apart, was the idea of flight congenial to his active resolution. After a time of penury he had at length experienced a course of ease which he would willingly prolong up to its farthest limit. Among these hopes there twined, perchance, the form of Hya, of the house of Tai. If, ran his most persuasive thought, by any means he could outwit the invading demon and preserve himself alive, might not the liberality of Kwok Shen be deeply stirred and all things wear a brighter face thenceforward? The deliberate way in which the snare had been exposed to him revealed that his own protective Forces were even now on the alert.

These varied facts had held Ming Tseuen for a flight of time involving hours when an unusual sound, slight

but insistent, at the shutter overhead recalled him to the moment. Scarcely daring to hope that it was that other now returned again, he drew the footstool to the wall and cautiously looked out. The cloud of night had gathered, but the great sky lantern hung above and by its beams Ming saw another, such as he himself, standing below.

"Who art thou standing there?" he whispered down, "and wherefore are you come?"

"I would see you face to face," replied a voice no less well guarded. "Thrust forth thy arm that I may clamber up."

"Stay while I get a worthier hold," responded Ming, and having done so complied. The one outside made good his claim, and twisting through the space adroitly they fell upon the floor together. As they got up the other laughed, and standing thus apart regarded Ming.

"Canst thou not guess?" he demanded artlessly. "I am that San, heir of the one who is lord here, and this is my own chamber. I know who you are though I must not speak the name. So that is as I am!" and he continued to regard Ming closely.

"Should he chance to come this way our skins will bear witness of the meeting to the day when that last measurement is taken," observed Ming darkly; then going to the door he pushed home the wedge above the latch so that none could enter.

"That I well know," admitted San, "but we shall have warning by his sonorous breathing from afar and you can then speed me through the shutter."

"True," agreed Ming. "Yet whence are you?"

"For seven days and nearly seven days more I have dwelt at the elder Kong's, under a very strict injunction that confines me there. But I may not tell thee why."

"Then how comes it now that you have disobeyed?"

"The way is left unguarded and I adventured down.

There came an irk to see the one who was, I heard him say, the double image of my living self—and as I likewise heard it would be to late to-morrow."

Ming Tseuen did not waver in his listless poise nor did he vary the unconcerned expression of his features.

"Why should to-morrow be too late?" he asked neglectfully.

"That I could tell also, but I will not lest you should guess too much," wisely replied the other. "But give heed to this: my shutter opens on an empty space where none pass by, and beneath it stands a water-cask on poles by which I scrambled down. Couldst thou have done as much?"

"If it gives you the foothold to descend, I doubt not that I could get up again," said Ming consideringly. "What is the place called where the elder Kong abides?"

"It has the symbol of a leaping goat and stands against the water-gate, a short space to the east—but why should you seek to know?" demanded San.

"I do not seek to know save in the light of converse," answered Ming, feeling his cautious path. "There is something to talk about in this exploit of thine—few of like age could have achieved it. And to have learned so much that would only be spoken of behind barred doors reveals a special aptness."

"As to that," declared the other proudly, "there is a passage close against the inner room where he and she recline that has a moving board unknown to them. Hadst thou not found it yet?"

"What need had I, seeing that we two are alike in everything, so that the one should tell all to the other?"

"That does not rejoice my face entirely," decided San, after he had thought upon it. "For seven days now and almost seven days more you have possessed my toys, while I in turn have been bereft of yours. . . . Where

is my phœnix upon wheels whose place was here? Have you incapably destroyed it?"

"Not I," declared Ming Tseuen, though mildly. "It is laid by. This person is too old for such immature devices."

"How so?" demanded San indignantly. "My years are twelve, while among the outside I freely pass for more. How many years are thine?"

"Mine are somewhat more, though I freely pass for less," admitted Ming. "Therein we meet upon a middle ground."

"Further," continued San vaingloriously, "I am affianced to a virtuous maiden of the worthy house of Tai, whom I shall in due course marry and have a hundred strong sons of my own. Are you——"

"Which one is that—this maiden?" interposed Ming Tseuen, more sharply than his wont.

"How should I say—not having ever seen her? But she has a sweet-smelling name and all the nine delights. Are you thus pledged or married?"

"Not yet," admitted Ming, "but I may some day attain it."

"I do not think so—though more I may not say lest I should tell too much. . . . Why, when I move my head or hand, do you do likewise also, and why should you change your voice to follow mine?"

"Consider the gladness of thy father's eyes when even he fails to discriminate between us," replied Ming, with an appropriate gesture such as San would use, and speaking with the counterpart of that one's voice. "Is it not—but hasten, one approaches from the inner hall. Here! Crouch quickly down behind this screen and eat your breath, or much bamboo awaits us!" Ming Tseuen only paused for a single beat of time to assure himself that San was adequately concealed before he sought to un-

wedge the door. Before he could reach it the latch was tried and the handle shaken.

"Why is the door barred against this person's coming, seeing that you have not yet had your nightly cup of wine?" inquired the one who stood there, a close attendant on Kwok Shen himself. "This is not apt, O San."

"I had forgot," replied Ming sleepily. "My mind is strange and dubious to-night. Regard it not, accommodating Tsoi."

"That may well be," assented Tsoi, with a hasty glance around and fingering a written charm he wore upon his wrist protectively. "For as I came I seemed to hear resentful voices in the air, and qualmous rustlings."

"Those also," agreed Ming more wakefully. "And wind-swirls overhead and beating wings, with sudden shrieks of mirth and other unclean sounds. What do these things portend, much-knowing?"

"I may not stay—he bade me hasten back," replied the weak-kneed Tsoi, taking a firm grasp upon the handle of the door. "This cup is from his own preparing hand. May you float tranquil in the Middle Air to-night!"

"May your constituents equalise harmoniously!" responded Ming, and they heard him bar the door on the outer side and marked his speedy footsteps down the passage.

"I also would withdraw," exclaimed San, coming forth and in a sudden tremor. "That matter of the creatures of the air did not appease my inner organs. I had not thought of that. Nor was the door barred thus when I slept here."

"Peace," said Ming reassuringly; "I have a new and most alluring artifice to show you yet. Where is the vampire kite that has a trusty cord attached? It turns on that."

"I do not care. I will not stay; at least, I will not stay unless you share with me the wine that Tsoi has brought. I was wont to have a cup of sweet spiced wine each night, and thou hast had it here while there I have had none."

"The wine: assuredly. That is but fair," agreed Ming Tseuen. He had already raised it to his lips to quell a sudden thirst that parched his throat, but now he turned aside to wipe his mouth and then held out the cup. "Your engaging moderation fills me with despair. Put my self-reproach at ease by drinking all."

"Yea; that is but fair," repeated San approvingly, "seeing how long you have enjoyed it. . . . It has a bitterish taste that was not wont to be."

"The rarer kinds of wine are often thus; it indicates a special sort of excellence."

"But this weighs down my eyes and sways my mind," objected San, with twitching limbs already. "It begins to burn my mouth. . . . I will not drink the rest."

"Consider well," urged Ming, "how humiliated would be the one who sent the wine if any should be left."

"I cannot—— Why does the room thus spin——"

"Cannot!" protested Ming, and by a swift and sudden move he held the other's head and raised the wine until the cup was empty. "Cannot! But see, thou hast!"

"That was not well," gasped San, turning to bite the hand that held him, ere he fell senseless to the ground. "To-night thou art outdone, misgotten dog!"

"Perchance; but the deities ordain," acquiesced Ming trustfully, "and this works to an end." He continued to regard the one stretched at his feet, and then he turned to wedge the door inside and to listen for a moment to the sounds about the house. San had not stirred nor did he move again.

"Much of this arises from an ordinary person interfer-

ing with the guiding hand of destiny," was the burden of Ming's thoughts, for in addition to his other qualities the one in question was both reverent and devout. "Even had he been content to leave matters at a middle stage there is no telling what the outer end might not have been, but by so ordering the wine that the demon should definitely understand that his vengeance was complete, the too painstaking Kwok Shen has stumbled. Yet with one so consistently inept it will be well to certify assurance."

Accordingly he took San up and raised him to a couch, and pressing a cushion down upon his face he held it firmly there. Meanwhile, as he waited for his self-imposed task to be complete, his grateful heart rejoiced:

"Plainly the spirits of my hitherto unknown but henceforth venerated ancestors have been at work and brought this thing to pass. Henceforth I will sacrifice to their very useful memories on a really worthy scale, nor will outside and comparatively second-rate deities be forgotten, so that all who have upheld my cause will receive something solid in return. Never again let it impiously be said, 'He who sets out to make his fortune should leave his gods at home.' Has not this person maintained integrity throughout and, behold, his poverty is changed to affluence, affectionate and influential parents are raised up to take the place of those whom he has never known, and the loadstar of all earthly desire is automatically reserved to minister to his future happiness? Assuredly there is more in this than formless chance."

By this time there could no longer be any reasonable doubt that Ming Tseuen's task was done. With a seemly regard in the observance he despoiled San of his robe and all he carried, wrapping the one that he had worn around him in return, and he also made certain changes in the room of a consistent nature. Then he drew himself up

to the shutter and cautiously looked out. The way was clear and the great sky lantern for a moment auspiciously withheld her light; Ming Tseuen dropped noiselessly to earth, and again reverently committing himself to the protection of his necessarily anonymous ancestors, he turned his trusting footsteps towards the elder Kong's, by the water-gate, a short distance to the east.

Ravenscourt Park, 1923.

II

The Delicate Case of Mlle. Celestine Bon

AMONG the really great problems that Armageddon called into being, the affair of Mlle. Bon can hold no place. Its interest is circumscribed, affecting as it merely does one woman and two men, or even, as you may judge when you have heard, one woman and about seven-eighths of two men. Yet I feel that it is not without a certain dramatic poignancy of its own. It might not have appealed to the Greek tragedians, because, for that matter, they would have experienced some difficulty in understanding its details; but the late W. S. Gilbert could have turned it to good account, and I can conceive that Mr. Bernard Shaw would have revelled in its possibilities as a problem play—had he not given up writing plays. For myself, I can only tell the plain unvarnished tale as—or as nearly as is feasible—it was told to me.

Célestine Bon was, as you will have guessed, French, but in order to understand her difficulty and the entirely proper vivacious fluency with which she handled its recital you had better appreciate how exquisitely French she was. She lived with her parents in a small town at no great distance from Paris, but on the safe side of the war map, and she had two suitors, Raoul, whom she adored, and Jean, whom she loathed. As Raoul was rich and virtuous, while Jean was certainly poor and of doubtful repute, this disposal of her affection would

seem to be quite satisfactory. A complicating element, however, was the fact that Raoul and Jean were foster-brothers and quite sincerely attached to one another. The favoured one, while rejoicing in his own good fortune, would have had Célestine extend towards Jean at least some degree of tolerance. He was utterly unable to comprehend so unbending a dislike on the lady's part, especially as she would suggest no reason for it; nor, as a matter of fact, do I.

The war took Célestine, Raoul and Jean unaware, but it took them all, just the same. Raoul and Jean were immediately swept out of sight and lost to all knowledge of their friends and apparently of everyone else. Célestine, not a whit less patriotic, at once flung herself into the crisis, and after duly qualifying emerged in the not unbecoming uniform of a nurse probationer and was allotted to a recuperation camp.

Here one day, in the usual course of things, she encountered a pale and interesting young officer of chasseurs who had just been sent down from a base hospital to complete the cure that was already assured.

"Raoul!" she cried, and but for her thorough training would have fainted into his arms.

"My Célestine!" responded the officer, embracing her regardless of all regulations. "But this is wonderful! How do you come here and in this fascinating garb?"

In a few words, interrupted by mutual caresses of endearment, she told him what had taken place since his departure.

"And you, my poor Raoul," she concluded; "what has happened to you? You have been wounded? How pale you are, even to your lips!"

"Célestine," replied Raoul gravely, "it is of this that I would speak. No longer shalt thou misjudge that brave fellow Jean Villjean——"

"Ah," exclaimed Célestine, pouting; "it is of him then, even at this moment, that you speak?"

"Truly," replied Raoul. "For were it not for Jean I should not at this moment be able to speak at all."

"He saved your life?" faltered Célestine.

"I would not go so far as to say that," admitted Raoul. "But he certainly enabled me to preserve that appearance which you have more than once been flattering enough to express approval of. Listen, Célestine. At the great defence of the village of Vergt, of which you have doubtless read, my squadron was in the foremost trenches, acting, of course, as infantry. The hostile bombardment was at its height when, just in front of us, an enormous shell burst with terrific force. Although it was fully fifty metres away, fragments whistled among us as thick as hail. Men fell to right and left of me. Something whizzed past my head, so near that it seemed as though it could not fail to inflict a deadly wound. Instinctively, although I had felt no pain, I clapped by hand to my face. It came away covered with blood. Then I discovered that my lips were missing; they had been shorn off as neatly as though by the surgeon's knife."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Célestine, who had not taken her enthralled eyes from Raoul's face during the recital of his story. "You exaggerate, my estimable friend. Cut, yes, I grant you, but not cut off. Why, there is hardly now a scar remaining."

"Yet nevertheless it is strictly true," asserted Raoul with some complacency. "That there is so little disfigurement to be seen is due to the wonders of our operative surgery, added to the devotion of the heroic Jean. He also was wounded in the action, not seriously, but in such a manner, by the loss of two fingers, as to unfit him for further active service; yet no sooner had this noble comrade heard of my plight than he insisted on sacrificing

two pieces of his own flesh to replace those that I had lost."

"You say this?" demanded the agitated Célestine. "And to me, your affianced?"

"Assuredly," assented Raoul, who was not very bright or subtle. "And why not? The operation was completely successful, so that now, as you have said, scarcely a mark remains to be seen."

"That concerns me not," exclaimed Célestine, springing away from her lover's arms. "Rather would I have you sliced into the semblance of a horse-radish were it but your own natural self. But to have the knowledge every time you embrace me that the lips which touch mine are those of Jean Villjean——"

"Not his lips," began Raoul, and pulled himself up—wisely, I think.

"It matters not; I cannot endure the thought," protested Célestine a little wildly. "It was to Raoul de Montbard that I gave myself, not to a being composed of several individualities, least of all Jean Villjean as regards his lips."

"But this is absurd," said Raoul. "That which certainly may have been Jean Villjean formerly is now thoroughly incorporated into my existence. Can Jean move my lips or utter words through them? Why, of course not. But I can, they being part of myself. Be reasonable, Célestine, and do not any longer harbour this unhealthy thought."

"I cannot help it," replied Célestine. "To me it is frankly odious. Do not seek to restrain me, amiable one. I must have a little time in solitude to consider this sudden obstacle to our happiness."

So Célestine Bon applied for leave of absence and obtained it. In the quietude of her own home, possibly, also, influenced by the absence of Raoul, a saner view of

the situation gradually prevailed in her mind. This revulsion delighted her; for, she argued, "If, after a week, this has become so little of moment, what will there be after a month? And at the end of a year there will be, pouf! nothing!" Thus Célestine blew away the last trace of her lingering doubt, thereby demonstrating the practical common-sense underlying her more obvious impulsiveness. She at once re-packed and endeavoured to return to her station, but much to her disappointment she was then informed that in the meantime she had been temporarily transferred elsewhere.

In the event it was nearly six months before Célestine got back to her old forest camp of N——. She liked the place and had allowed her application for reinstatement to stand, although the first urgent reason for it had by this time passed away, of course. Raoul would have returned to his duties long ago. Yet almost the first person to be encountered on passing the dear old rickety gate of the recuperation camp was de Montbard, looking very much the same as before. They embraced. In less than half-an-hour Célestine had rapidly gone over the groundwork of her emotions; then she turned to the subject of Raoul himself.

"But you, my poor warrior, why do you not speak of yourself? Assuredly your convalescence must have been longer than we anticipated for me to find you still here. Did you then suffer a relapse?"

"On the contrary," replied Raoul. "I was back again at the front within a month of your departure. Ill luck, however, still pursued me, for within a short time the accursed Boche deluged our trench with liquid fire. Thus a second time I was condemned to the inaction of hospital life."

"The pigs!" hissed Célestine. "Were you very badly burned?"

"Only my right arm," replied Raoul heroically; "but of that the skin was destroyed from finger-tip to shoulder."

"That would entail a very serious wound," mused Célestine. "You must possess a marvellous constitution, my Raoul, for the arm about my waist is as firm and vigorous as ever."

"That is due to the skill of the doctors who so cleverly patched me up. But why talk of these trifles? You, my Célestine, upon the honour of my name, you are looking more bewitching than ever."

Did Célestine's rapid intuition perceive a cautionary signal in this reluctance on her lover's part to talk about himself and his achievements? At all events she said:

"But naturally I am much interested in this latest adventure of yours. How was so speedy a recovery effected?"

"Um, well," stammered Raoul uneasily; "I suppose as you say, that my constitution——"

"You have made use of the expression 'patch up,' my friend," interposed Célestine with icy firmness. "Did they then, these skilful surgeons, employ tissue grafting?"

"Why, yes; I believe that there was some little detail of the sort," admitted Raoul. "But you have not yet told me how the old place was looking and if the new curé——"

"All in good time, my poor sufferer; you naturally demand my first thoughts. Who was the kind friend who so nobly submitted to the inconvenience of having pieces of his skin removed in order to supply your need?"

"I was—er—unconscious at the time," prevaricated the unhappy Raoul. His evasion would not have deceived a Siamese cat, let alone Célestine Bon.

"But assuredly you would have learned his name after-

wards," she persisted. "It was an obligation, and a de Montbard does not forget. Was it"—her eyes met his like the points of two stilettos—"was it by any chance Jean Villjean?"

"Why, since you mention him, I remember that it was," assented Raoul with patent artlessness. "He——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Célestine, tearing herself free, "but this transcends the possible limit! It is not enough that I must endure Jean Villjean's lips pressed against my face. His arm, down even to the extremities of the fingers—admittedly the most delicate organs of the touch—may now insinuate themselves around my waist. What next, I wonder? I refuse to contemplate the eventuality! The arm from which I tear myself is not that of Raoul de Montbard, to whose memory I shall remain faithful for ever, but the arm of Jean Villjean. Adieu, composite monster!"

With that, Célestine Bon departed from the recuperation camp yet again. This time she did not even wait for official permission, so that with unauthorised absence from duty the incident of her service for the Allied cause regretfully closed. But on that score Mlle. Bon has no misgivings. It was merely impossible for her to act otherwise. Any woman—certainly any Frenchwoman—will understand and will tender her a silent and respectful sympathy.

It is quite true that once more, in the calm atmosphere of her domestic round, Célestine's heart has begun to soften towards the absent warrior, but she is practical enough to be warned by experience. The same sort of thing occurred before, and what happened then? She could endure—nay, treasure—a Raoul reduced by valour to the mere truncation of a man, his features battered beyond recognition, but not one who, before her eyes, is

slowly and insidiously passing into the identity of a despised and rejected suitor.

Besides, and here I am bound to confess Célestine touches on possibilities too delicate for my insular pen to probe; where, she demands, is the thing to end? Raoul is brave, rash and obviously unlucky. Jean is, one must admit even though one admits it with a shrug, plucky, devoted to his friend, and practically inexhaustible. The possibilities of operative surgery are, as we begin to see, illimitable. The war, at this critical point in the interlaced destinies of these three hapless beings, scarcely beyond its third year, is declared by the majority to be only just beginning, and while some predict a seven years' course for it, others, with just as formidable an artillery of argument, place its continuance at seventy times seven. Soon there must come a point at which Raoul will have become rather more Jean than Raoul and thenceforward he will, after each operation, become Jeanified with increasing momentum. Heart and brain may remain Raoulish (though even here Célestine has no actual guarantee against medical science), but it may be suspected that these attributes are less prominent in Célestine's fond remembrance than Raoul's prepossessing exterior.

. . . . . .

"But they all change, sooner or later," says wise maman consolingly. "Be reconciled, my child."

Hastings, 1920.

III

The Dead March

I WOKE very early that morning with the sound of music in my ears. It was a band, a distant band; evidently, I thought, some troops are changing camp, and I lay awake listening until the strains exercised a strange possession over me, for never, I declare, had I heard a melody so haunting. It was all things. From the wail of lament it rose to the blazonry of triumph, from joy passed to sorrow, spoke now of hope and now of despair, shrilled victory in defeat and relentlessly voiced the barrenness of conquest. It was of pagan grandeur, of Arcadian simplicity, of cities and of glades. A mother with her laughing child; Cæsar to his victorious army; a shepherd fluting at a spring; a dead warrior lying stark by night on a desolate waste. Sometimes I thought that it was approaching, sometimes receding, but this I discovered was nothing but the vagarity of the wind, and presently the music was no more and the night was empty of sound and cold with the loneliness of bereavement.

It was still very early when I rose and went out. Day was just breaking, like day at the beginning of time before things were. The villages of Preston and Sutton Poyntz lay beneath me in the valley, but they were as a picture that is limned and no smoke came from the chimneys of their hearths, nor was there any sound save that from the more distant water-meadows beyond; at intervals a sheep-bell gave a note. About me lay the grave-mounds

of the ancient dead and the wide, open spaces of the wind-shorn heights.

By the time I had reached the cleft of the valley the sun had risen and what had hitherto been a particle of eternity had become a day. The earliest mushroom-gatherer was swinging along the beach on his way to the salted downs, as his daily custom is, and the melodious confusion of the sheep-bells told that the flock was being driven from its nightly harbourage in the enclosed pasture to the hazardous freedom of the cliffs. Presently they swung past me in a billowy mass, and leaping at a gap debouche into a barley stubble. An urchin and a tousled hound accompanied and controlled them; when they reached the heights the child dropped a careless word to the wistful dog, and throwing himself down on the turf by the very edge of the sheer precipice, drew a volume from a pocket of his ragged coat.

The little bay here has this peculiarity: that at one point all the lighter kinds of wreckage come ashore, while further along one may find (especially after a storm) bolts and nails, cannon balls and parts of strange and obsolete weapons, coins of all ages, and odd and unexpected things—all these, I say, may be found along this stretch, but never by any chance wreckage that will float. It was here on this morning that I picked up an ancient bit of silver, a denarius of Rome, lying among the stones. It was somewhat encrusted with pitch, and as I walked I rubbed it with a little moist sand to clear the lettering.

The mushroom-gatherer had gone by now, passing me with a word after the friendly custom of these parts, and I had fancied that I had the beach to myself, until, happening to look up, my eyes were attracted by a striking figure. Doubtless I should have noted his approach had I not been so engrossed in rubbing my find and trying to decipher its inscription, for he was now standing directly

in front of me. I took him to be a visitor who had come out for an early bathe, probbaly a sojourner at one of the old coastguard cottages just beyond the hills, where people stay in summer, for he wore sandals and a shapeless dressing-gown or robe of purple. He was a man well advanced in years and his expression, without being in anyway distinguished, was dignified and shrewd. His odd attire might be excused in circumstances where men relax, but his salutation challenged resentment, until I remembered that the ground on which we stood and the eternal hills around were an enduring memorial to those dim ages when our race was shaping in the mould. Here on every side the landmarks are the temples or the citadels, the graves or the pleasances of contending races who achieved their destinies and are no more, while to this day that ancient leveller, the ploughman, mixes their bones impartially and lays bare their household gods without reverence and scarcely with curiosity.

"Hail, Briton!" had been his greeting.

I stared for a moment and then smiled to myself. "Here," I thought, "is one of those enthusiasts who lose themselves in the past. Doubtless he has a theory about some obscure fosse or vallum, and in the everlasting consideration of it he has become absent-minded." For the moment, I say, I was taken aback; then, observing that the lines of his face were not destitute of humour, I had the impulse to recall him to the present by responding in like strain.

"Greetings," I accordingly replied with fitting gravity. "Greeting, Imperial Rome!"

Instead of betraying any confusion or surprise, my new acquaintance inclined his head slightly, as though receiving homage that was due.

"This spot pleases me well, as it ever did," he mused aloud. "It was here that our prows first touched after

voyaging across from Vectis" (his glance indicated the single gleaming shoulder that the Isle of Wight raised above the thin sea mist), "and in my tent, pitched in yon meadow just beyond the stream, I composed at nights the march that was on your lips."

"A march—on my lips just now?" I stammered.

"Assuredly, or I should not have spoken you. You know the music of it? Nay, then listen."

I listened, and very faintly in the distance I heard the refrain of the melody that had so impressed me. Possibly I had been humming it, as he said, but quite unconsciously.

"It lacks the plaintive quality of flutes," he remarked critically as we listened. "But that is an instrument for which our martial bands made no provision."

"You are a musician then?" I said.

"An amateur," he admitted carelessly. "Still, one who as a mere proconsul turned his back on a despot, rather than endure his discords, may be allowed to claim an ear."

My knowledge of music—or of despots—did not enable me to identify the particular ruler he alluded to. I sought enlightenment obliquely.

"Was he indeed so very poor a player?"

"He was not only that. After making due allowance for his exalted rank, he was, I would assert, the very worst player who has ever ventured to confront an audience. Moreover, he was partial to the fiddle, of all instruments, and prone to resort to it at inopportune moments."

"Your own composition——" I ventured.

He waved his hand in deprecation.

"I do not seek comparison," he said. "In my opinion the arts are scarcely the fit attribute of a soldier, except perchance, as in the case of the first Cæsar, to record his

victories. But I was younger then and not long married. Around and before me lay the doubts and dangers of an arduous campaign in an unknown land; so that, under the stars at times, and ever to the accompaniment of the breakers on this rocky shore (it has changed but little), I felt inspired to voice the hopeless valour of the Durotriges."

I suppose my look indicated the blankness of my mind on the subject of the Durotriges.

"The inhabitants of this region—Belgæ our historians deemed them," he explained. "Less capably armed than the similar tribes of Gaul, they vied with them in desperate courage. For three days and three nights the tribesmen here withstood the Second Legion, yielding only foot by foot until they had covered their retirement to their great hill-fortress, two hours' march yonder to the north."

"Maiden Castle!" I exclaimed; for, about eight miles distant from the place we stood on, there exists to this day a stronghold such as he described, a camp so colossal in its scope, so ambitious in its scheme of ramparts, that it is scarcely credible as the achievement of a primitive people, toiling almost literally with their hands alone. Inferior, neither to the Pyramids nor the Sphinx in its solitary grandeur, it would certainly be much visited by our tourists were it but placed say in China or Peru.

"Dunium we called it. There the entire tribe assembled with their flocks and herds well secured, and there they might have held us at bay until we wearied of the siege or until Claudius recalled us, had it not been for one weakness to which the inhabitants of this island were ever prone."

"And that was?" I inquired.

"They were too late, being over-sanguine in a false security. Dunium was feverishly begun, it would appear,

under the threat of Julius Cæsar's invasion, but he failed to penetrate these wilds and, the danger passing, Dunium was never finished. There existed, we discovered, a weakness in the ramparts to the south. Between our landing and the investment of their camp there was not time to repair the deficiency. It proved fatal. Once our velites had gained the higher plane the most devoted valour, backed only by flint-heads, availed the defenders nothing. Dunium was ours. A great fight. We gave them martial honours. *Væ victis!* it must ever be, but a conqueror should know how to be magnanimous in victory. Their dead rest in peace under their own rites."

Far out at sea a great bird, poised in swift flight aloft, spied what it sought and flashed its message shoreward. In one of the hidden forts that stud the coast a single cannot cleared its throat.

"Thunder of Jove! but that was a shrewd bolt!" exclaimed he of the purple. "The tribe still follows Mars?"

"There are no young men in the valley now," I made answer. "They carry their standard on many an alien field."

"It is known to us; we, too, have met the Hun. . . . . Yes, this spot was often in my thoughts in after years, and whenever our arms encountered outmatched valour I again saw the terraced heights of Dunium. Ofttime, when a report of some deed of fitting worth reached my ears, I would have one of our bands perform my march—though they knew not it was mine—to the memory of the brave. It was set to eighteen instruments of brass—six trumpets, six horns——"

The mist from the land had been stealing down the valley as we talked. Quite suddenly it enveloped us, shutting out all things beyond and even each one from the other. I called aloud but there was no reply; took a

few steps blindly forward only to meet the grey earth of the cliff. Then the wind from off the sea lapped back the mist and I found that I was again alone on the deserted shore.

I walked back along the winding stream and past the spot where once a leisured gentleman of Durnovaria built for himself a villa. Its tesselated pavement still remains *in situ*. On the highway I fell in with a soldier and we walked along together.

"I suppose a draft of the 4th moved out of Upton Camp about three o'clock this morning," I remarked when the occasion offered. "I heard what I took to be their band."

"The 4th left two days ago," he answered. "There's no one in at Upton now."

"Then the band?" I persisted. "What band was there about?"

He looked at me a little curiously—or perhaps I fancied it.

"I heard no band," he said, "and I was out on guard duty up at Bincombe then. If there had been a band," he decided with the doggedness of simple conviction, "I reckon I should 'a heard it."

When I reached home again the morning papers had just arrived. You will recall that day perhaps. This was what their head-lines blazed forth:

HEROIC STAND AT MONS

BRITISH DESPERATELY OUTNUMBERED

A little later I took an opportunity to complete the scouring of my coin. It disclosed the head of an elderly man, dignified without being distinguished, and wearing a wreath of laurel. The inscription around it was this:

IMP. CÆSAR VESPASIANVS AVG.

Vespasian? Well, certainly, if any emperor were destined to become a Slave of the Coin it might—despite his many virtues—well be Vespasian.

Ravenscourt Park, 1919.

IV

A Very Black Business

MR. BROWN was in the act of looking down the barrel of a revolver when a noise—a call—somewhere in the stairway of his block of flats arrested his hand. There were three reasons why at that supreme moment he was susceptible to so slight an influence; the cry was a curiously melodious one, and the hearer was by nature and profession a musician; it was, as well as a melodious call, a strangely old-world one; and it seemed to speak of coal. Now it was precisely the absence of this commodity that was driving the musician to his rash act. A trivial cause for so tremendous a result, it may be urged, and perhaps it was, but Mr. Brown was of the artistic temperament and therefore quite outside the ordinary standard of reasonable conduct.

In this matter of coal he had really very little to complain of. Warned both by the previous winter's experience and by certain official recommendations, he had gone to his usual coal merchant early in the month of May and ordered the full capacity of his modest cupboard—a single ton. Delivery was faithfully promised for that day week—between nine and ten in the morning—and, rejoicing greatly, Mr. Brown returned with the assurance.

In July Mrs. Brown gave up carpeting the hall with newspapers on wet days in anticipation of the coal-man's arrival.

In August Mr. Brown called on eleven other coal merchants and recklessly ordered a ton of coal from each. Seven declined the business; of the others, one promised delivery that day week at 8.30 in the morning (or, he added, between 8.30 and a quarter to nine, say), another that day twelvemonth, and the remainder at various intervening dates.

Later in the month Brown wrote an unwise letter to each of the dealers, stating that although he had thoughtlessly specified coal when ordering, he was really prepared to accept whatever substitute they were then supplying under that name. It was only his way of reminding them; but as the tone of the communication was light and flippant, each recipient thought that it must convey some hidden insult, and the order was accordingly struck off the books.

In September his original dealer rebuked him for impatience, pointing out that although he had been faithfully promised coal in May, there were many others in the same plight who had been just as faithfully promised for April or even March.

In October Mr. Brown began to contemplate suicide as the simplest way out of it. For over a month the nights had been seasonably cold, and even in the daytime it had now become unpleasantly chilly sitting before an empty grate. To stay in meant being starved to death; to go out (the servant had been dispensed with as a war economy) meant missing the coal when it did arrive. That morning Mrs. Brown had ventured on a well-meant suggestion. Her husband had feigned to accept it in a vein of sustained irony. Ultimately the lady had gone out shopping in tears, and it now seemed to the repentant and unhappy man that the best thing he could do was to go out in smoke.

But in the meanwhile the unusual call had drawn

nearer, floor by floor (the Brown flat was on the highest), and a vigorous knock sounded on the door. With an instinctive courtesy, even at that moment, the musician at once went to answer it, absent-mindedly still grasping the weapon in his hand. A sturdy little man in a long blue coat stood outside; skilfully balanced on his shoulder was a weighty sack.

"You required small coal, sir?"

"This way," replied Mr. Brown, somewhat dazed. He did not care whether the coal was small or in half-hundredweight blocks. He led the way and the man followed and shot his burden.

"I'm afraid that it's rather a pull, coming up so far," apologised Brown. "Are there two of you?"

"Oh, that makes no odds," replied the coal-man amiably. "You see, I take a special interest in musicians, and hearing that you were desperate like——"

"You knew that I was a musician?"

"Oh, yes; I often hear you playing."

"Really! I had no idea that my violin carried down to the street. And I don't seem to remember your call before."

"I seldom have occasion to call in the street now. Not that I am ashamed of my call—or of my calling. That can never be said of Tom Britton, sir. Even when I happen to meet, as I sometimes do, my duchess——"

"Your duchess!"

"Her Grace of Queensberry, I mean, sir; she being so regular at my concerts——"

"Concerts! You give concerts? Really. But how . . . where . . . Do you take the Queen's Hall?"

"Queen's Hall? Oh, no; it's just a loft over my coal-shed against Clerkenwell—a few chairs, a platform, a cup of coffee, and music of a Thursday evening."

"I see . . . over your coal-shed . . . and the duchess

comes regularly on Thursday evenings—early closing, of course. . . . Very natural. . . . Pray, what instrument do you play, Mr. Britton?"

"Indifferently on most, sir. I have a very fine bass viol by Norman, and a Rucker virginal scarcely to be matched in Europe. But for the talent which draws so many of the noble and discriminating to my loft I am indebted to my friends. Mr. Banister takes the first violin, Sir Roger L'Estrange the viol, Mr. Hughes, Mr. Woolaston and Mr. Shuttleworth other instruments of the band, and for the harpsichord I am generally beholden to Dr. Pepusch, while frequently the great Mr. George Handel journeys to Clerkenwell to play my organ."

"Mr. George Handel? . . . *Handel!*" Mr. Brown's startled eyes took in anew the sturdy if unaggressive form of his visitor. "Yes . . . yes . . . of course . . . it *is* very warm carrying up these sacks . . . a glass . . . something cooling?"

The coal-man smilingly declined the offer, and, as if reminded of his duty, made haste to get through the work on hand. In a shorter time than Mr. Brown had ever known any other load of even half the amount handled, the full tale of twenty sacks had been shot in, and the relieved flat-holder saw his "cellar" crammed to its full capacity. He avoided the subject of music, however, nor did the harmonious coal-heaver revert to it.

"It looks good coal," commented Brown, as the last sack was emptied, "though certainly not large."

"Small coal of the best," was the reply. "It may perhaps burn a little sulphurous, but it's none the worse for that, and it comes from a very noted Pit."

"Well, when I have any more I hope that your people will send you with it; for I have never before had it brought up so easily."

"I will mention it to my Firm, sir," said the little man.

"But the Head isn't always in the best of tempers—makes these small attentions difficult sometimes."

It was not until he had gone that Mr. Brown remembered something. In the strangeness of the whole affair he had forgotten to pay the bill; nor, for the matter of that, had the man presented it. The musician hurried to a front window to catch the name on the cart, for he was not even sure to which firm he owed the supply. There a fresh surprise awaited him in that day of wonders. There was no cart in sight. There was no coalman in sight. The stairs were empty. Nothing but the coal itself and the delicious lingering aroma of waxed sacking remained to prove the reality of the visit.

That afternoon Mr. Brown set out to discharge the account. He called first on his regular dealer, and found him involved in a wordy conflict with an acrimonious lady who had been promised some coal in February. It would appear that it had not yet arrived, and she was demanding to be told what she was to do, now that the Government regulated everything.

"Don't ask me," the harassed man was saying as Mr. Brown entered. "I'm not the Government."

"Still, you might as well be," she replied. "They don't seem to do anything but sit about and make promises."

"What else are they to do," he retorted furiously, "with people like you about?"

"I should think they might try managing coal depots," was her parting shot. "Looks as though they are cut out for it."

"And what can I do for *you,* sir?" demanded the manager of Mr. Brown, with passionate intentness.

"Some coal was left at my place this morning. I don't know if it came from you——"

"You have the delivery-note, I suppose?"

"Curiously enough, one does not seem to have been left, and I——"

"Well, it's none of ours, for I have your order down for next week. Thursday morning, early. You have probably been imposed on by someone."

"I don't quite see how that can be. The man—a little, cheerful fellow, who made nothing of the stairs——"

"Not one of our men," said the manager decisively. "Good-day."

Mr. Brown left the office and tried the next most likely place, and then the next. But nowhere was he successful. No sooner did he essay to describe his obliging visitor than he was cut short by the positive assurance that there was no such man in their employ.

At last only one office remained—the least promising. He went on to it only as a matter of form, and began the now familiar tale:

"Some coal was delivered——"

"Yes?" prompted the young man in attendance, for the words had been cut off by a gasp.

"That . . . you have a picture over there," stammered Mr. Brown in a shaking voice, and pointing. "Might I look at it?"

"Certainly," assented the clerk agreeably. "Rum old thing, isn't it?" And he lifted the counter-flap for Mr. Brown to pass within.

It was a print of a stout, little, pleasant-faced man in a blue smock-frock, displaying in his hand a coal-measure, as though to assert that he was by no means ashamed of his calling. Beneath were the words: "Thomas Britton (A.D. 1654-1714). The Musical Coal Man. From the painting in the National Portrait Gallery."

"Governor brought it round one day and stuck it up

there," volunteered the youth. "Sort of patron saint of the business, as you might say."

"Who is—was he, do you know?"

"Well, I looked him up at the time, or I shouldn't. Yes; quite a character in his time. A coal-dealer in a small way—delivered the stuff himself. And yet that man, sir, was one of the foremost musicians of his day. Gave concerts that attracted all the toffs out of the West End to his coal-hole somewhere. Absolutely hand-in-glove with the élite in a manner of speaking, and yet going round with his coal all the time."

"It was true then," murmured Mr. Brown.

"Oh, quite true, I assure you. And that wasn't all. He went in for chemistry and astrology, and things that weren't much understood then, and, in fact, got the name for having dealings with the devil! Of course, that's all my eye."

"Quite," assented Mr. Brown feebly. "Good-morning."

"Oh, you're very welcome," said the clerk hospitably.

Ravenscourt Park, 1918.

V

The Bunch of Violets

AN EPISODE IN THE WAR-TIME ACTIVITIES OF MAX CARRADOS

WHEN Mr. J. Beringer Hulse, in the course of one of his periodical calls at the War Office, had been introduced to Max Carrados he attached no particular significance to the meeting. His own business there lay with Mr. Flinders, one of the quite inconspicuous departmental powers so lavishly produced by a few years of intensive warfare: business that was more confidential than exacting at that stage and hitherto carried on *à deux*. The presence on this occasion of a third, this quiet, suave, personable stranger, was not out of line with Mr. Hulse's open-minded generalities on British methods: "A little singular, perhaps, but not remarkable," would have been the extent of his private comment. He favoured Max with a hard, entirely friendly, American stare, said, "Vurry pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Carrados," as they shook hands, and went on with his own affair.

Of course Hulse was not to know that Carrados had been brought in especially to genialise with him. Most of the blind man's activities during that period came within the "Q-class" order. No one ever heard of them, very often they would have seemed quite meaningless under description, and generally they were things that he alone could do—or do as effectively at all events. In

the obsolete phraseology of the day, they were his "bit."

"There's this man Hulse," Flinders had proceeded, when it came to the business on which Carrados had been asked to call at Whitehall. "Needless to say, he's no fool or Jonathan wouldn't have sent him on the ticket he carries. If anything, he's too keen—wants to see everything, do anything and go everywhere. In the meanwhile he's kicking up his heels here in London with endless time on his hands and the Lord only knows who mayn't have a go at him."

"You mean for information—or does he carry papers?" asked Carrados.

"Well, at present, information chiefly. He necessarily knows a lot of things that would be priceless to the Huns, and a clever man or woman might find it profitable to nurse him."

"Still, he must be on his guard if, as you say, he is—— No one imagines that London in 1917 is a snakeless Eden or expects that German agents to-day are elderly professors who say, 'How vos you?' and 'Ja, ja!' "

"My dear fellow," said Flinders sapiently, "every American who came to London before the war was on his guard against a pleasant-spoken gentleman who would accost him with, 'Say, stranger, does this happen to be your wallet lying around here on the sidewalk?' and yet an unending procession of astute, long-headed citizens met him, exactly as described, year after year, and handed over their five hundred or five thousand pounds on a tale that would have made a common or Michaelmas goose blush to be caught listening to."

"It's a curious fact," admitted Carrados thoughtfully. "And this Hulse?"

"Oh, he's quite an agreeable chap, you'll find. He may know a trifle more than you and be a little wider awake and see further through a brick wall and so on,

but he won't hurt your feelings about it. Well, will you do it for us?"

"Certainly," replied Carrados. "What is it, by the way?"

Flinders laughed his apologies and explained more precisely.

"Hulse has been over here a month now, and it may be another month before the details come through which he will take on to Paris. Then he will certainly have documents of very special importance that he must carry about with him. Well, in the meanwhile, of course, he is entertained and may pal up with anyone or get himself into Lord knows what. We can't keep him here under lock and key or expect him to make a report of every fellow he has a drink with or every girl he meets."

"Quite so," nodded the blind man.

"Actually, we have been asked to take precautions. It isn't quite a case for the C.I.D.—not at this stage, that is to say. So if I introduce him to you and you fix up an evening for him or something of the sort and find out where his tastes lie, and—and, in fact, keep a general shepherding eye upon him——" He broke off abruptly, and Carrados divined that he had reddened furiously and was kicking himself in spirit. The blind man raised a deprecating hand.

"Why should you think that so neat a compliment would pain me, Flinders?" he asked quietly. "Now if you had questioned the genuineness of some of my favourite tetradrachms I might have had reason to be annoyed. As it is, yes, I will gladly keep a general shepherding ear on J. Beringer as long as may be needful."

"That's curious," said Flinders, looking up quickly. "I didn't think that I had mentioned his front name."

"I don't think that you have," agreed Carrados.

"Then how—— Had you heard of him before?"

"You don't give an amateur conjurer much chance," replied the other whimsically. "When you brought me to this chair I found a table by me, and happening to rest a hand on it my fingers had 'read' a line of writing before I realised it—just as your glance might as unconsciously do," and he held up an envelope addressed to Hulse.

"That is about the limit," exclaimed Flinders with some emphasis. "Do you know, Carrados, if I hadn't always led a very blameless life I should be afraid to have you around the place."

Thus it came about that the introduction was made and in due course the two callers left together.

"You'll see Mr. Carrados down, won't you?" Flinders had asked, and, slightly puzzled but not disposed to question English ways, Hulse had assented. In the passage Carrados laid a light hand on his companion's arm. Through some subtle perception he read Hulse's mild surprise.

"By the way, I don't think that Flinders mentioned my infirmity," he remarked. "This part of the building is new to me and I happen to be quite blind."

"You astonish me," declared Hulse, and he had to be assured that the statement was literally exact. "You don't seem to miss much by it, Mr. Carrados. Ever happen to hear of Laura Bridgman?"

"Oh, yes," replied Carrados. "She was one of your star cases. But Laura Bridgman's attainments really were wonderful. She was also deaf and dumb, if you remember."

"That is so," assented Hulse. "My people come from New Hampshire not far from Laura's home, and my mother had some of her needlework framed as though it was a picture. That's how I come to know of her, I reckon."

They had reached the street meanwhile and Carrados heard the door of his waiting car opened to receive him.

"I'm going on to my club now to lunch," he remarked with his hand still on his companion's arm. "Of course we only have a wartime menu, but if you would keep me company you would be acting the Good Samaritan," and Beringer Hulse, who was out to see as much as possible of England, France and Berlin within the time—perhaps, also, not uninfluenced by the appearance of the rather sumptuous vehicle—did not refuse.

"Vurry kind of you to put it in that way, Mr. Carrados," he said, in his slightly business-like, easy style. "Why, certainly I will."

During the following weeks Carrados continued to make himself very useful to the visitor, and Hulse did not find his stay in London any less agreeably varied thereby. He had a few other friends—acquaintances rather—he had occasion now and then to mention, but they, one might infer, were either not quite so expansive in their range of hospitality or so pressing for his company. The only one for whom he had ever to excuse himself was a Mr. Darragh, who appeared to have a house in Densham Gardens (he was a little shrewdly curious as to what might be inferred of the status of a man who lived in Densham Gardens), and, well, yes, there was Darragh's sister, Violet. Carrados began to take a private interest in the Darragh household, but there was little to be learned beyond the fact that the house was let furnished to the occupant from month to month. Even during the complexities of war that fact alone could not be regarded as particularly incriminating.

There came an evening when Hulse, having an appointment to dine with Carrados and to escort him to a theatre afterwards, presented himself in a mixed state

of elation and remorse. His number had come through at last, he explained, and he was to leave for Paris in the morning. Carrados had been most awfully, most frightfully—Hulse became quite touchingly incoherent in his anxiety to impress upon the blind man the fullness of the gratitude he felt, but, all the same, he had come to ask whether he might cry off for the evening. There was no need to inquire the cause. Carrados raised an accusing finger and pointed to the little bunch of violets with which the impressionable young man had adorned his button-hole.

"Why, yes, to some extent," admitted Hulse, with a facile return to his ingenuous, easy way. "I happened to see Miss Darragh down town this afternoon. There's a man they know whom I've been crazy to meet for weeks, a Jap who has the whole ju-jitsu business at his finger-ends. Best ju-jitsuist out of Japan, Darragh says. Mighty useful thing, ju-jitsu, nowadays, Carrados."

"At any time, indeed," conceded Carrados. "And he will be there to-night?"

"Certain. They've tried to fix it up for me half-a-dozen times before, but this Kuromi could never fit it in. Of course this will be the only chance."

"True," agreed the blind man, rather absent-mindedly. "Your last night here."

"I don't say that in any case I should not have liked to see Violet—Miss Darragh—again before I went, but I wouldn't have gone back on an arranged thing for that," continued Hulse virtuously. "Now this ju-jitsu I look on more in the light of business."

"Rather a rough-and-tumble business one would think," suggested Carrados. "Nothing likely to drop out of your pockets in the process and get lost?"

Hulse's face displayed a rather more superior smile

than he would have permitted himself had his friend been liable to see it and be snubbed thereby.

"I know what you mean, of course," he replied, getting up and going to the blind man's chair, "but don't you worry about me, Father William. Just put your hand to my breast pocket."

"Sewn up," commented Carrados, touching the indicated spot on his guest's jacket.

"Sewn up: that's it; and since I've had any important papers on me it always has been sewn up, no matter how often I change. No fear of anything dropping out now—or being lifted out, eh? No, *sir;* if what I carry there chanced to vanish, I guess no excuses would be taken and J. B. H. would automatically drop down to the very bottom of the class. As it is, if it's missing I shall be missing too, so that won't trouble me."

"What time do you want to get there?"

"Darragh's? Well, I left that open. Of course I couldn't promise until I had seen you. Anyway, not until after dinner, I said."

"That makes it quite simple, then," declared Carrados. "Stay and have dinner here, and afterwards we will go on to Darragh's together instead of going to the theatre."

"That's most terribly kind of you," replied Hulse. "But won't it be rather a pity—the tickets, I mean, and so forth?"

"There are no tickets as it happens," said Carrados. "I left that over until to-night. And I have always wanted to meet a ju-jitsu champion. Quite providential, isn't it?"

. . . . . .

It was nearly nine o'clock, and seated in the drawing-room of his furnished house in Densham Gardens, affecting to read an evening paper, Mr. Darragh was plainly ill at ease. The strokes of the hour, sounded by the

little gilt clock on the mantelpiece, seemed to mark the limit of his patience. A muttered word escaped him and he looked up with a frown.

"It was nine that Hulse was to be here by, wasn't it, Violet?" he asked.

Miss Darragh, who had been regarding him for some time in furtive anxiety, almost jumped at the simple question.

"Oh, yes, Hugh—about nine, that is. Of course he had to——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Darragh irritably; "we've heard all that. And Sims," he continued, more for the satisfaction of voicing his annoyance than to engage in conversation, "swore by everything that we should have that coat by eight at the very latest. My God! what rotten tools one has to depend on!"

"Perhaps——" began Violet timidly, and stopped at his deepening scowl.

"Yes?" said Darragh, with a deadly smoothness in his voice. "Yes, Violet; pray continue. You were about to say——"

"It was really nothing, Hugh," she pleaded. "Nothing at all."

"Oh, yes, Violet, I am sure that you have some helpful little suggestion to make," he went on in the same silky, deliberate way. Even when he was silent his unspoken thoughts seemed to be lashing her with bitterness, and she turned painfully away to pick up the paper he had flung aside. "The situation, Kato," resumed Darragh, addressing himself to the third occupant of the room, "is bluntly this: If Sims isn't here with that coat before young Hulse arrives, all our carefully-thought-out plan, a month's patient work, and about the last both of our cash and credit, simply go to the devil! . . . and Violet wants to say that perhaps Mr. Sims forgot to wind his

watch last night or poor Mrs. Sims's cough is worse. . . . Proceed, Violet; don't be diffident."

The man addressed as "Kato" knocked a piece off the chessboard he was studying and stooped to pick it up again before he replied. Then he looked from one to the other with a face singularly devoid of expression.

"Perhaps. Who says?" he replied in his quaintly-ordered phrases. "If it is to be, my friend, it will be."

"Besides, Hugh," put in Violet, with a faint dash of spirit, "it isn't really quite so touch-and-go as that. If Sims comes before Hulse has left, Kato can easily slip out and change coats then."

Darragh was already on his restless way towards the door. Apparently he did not think it worth while to reply to either of the speakers, but his expression, especially when his eyes turned to Violet, was one of active contempt. As the door closed after him, Kato sprang to his feet and his impassive look gave place to one almost of menace. His hands clenched unconsciously and with slow footsteps he seemed to be drawn on in pursuit. A little laugh, mirthless and bitter, from the couch, where Violet had seated herself, recalled him.

"Is it true, Katie," she asked idly, "that you are really the greatest ju-jitsuist outside Japan?"

"Polite other people say so," replied the Japanese, his voice at once gentle and deprecating.

"And yet you cannot keep down even your little temper!"

Kato thought this over for a moment; then he crossed to the couch and stood regarding the girl with his usual impenetrable gravity.

"On contrary, I can keep down my temper very well," he said seriously. "I can keep it so admirably that I, whose ancestors were Samurai and very high nobles, have been able to become thief and swindler and"—his mov-

ing hand seemed to beat the air for a phrase—"and low-down dog and still to live. What does anything it matter that is connected with me alone? But there are three things that do matter—three that I do not allow myself to be insulted and still to live: my emperor, my country, and—you. And so," concluded Kato Kuromi, in a somewhat lighter vein, "now and then, as you say, my temper gets the better of me slightly."

"Poor Katie," said Violet, by no means disconcerted at this delicate avowal. "I really think that I am sorrier for you than I am for Hugh, or even for myself. But it's no good becoming romantic at this time of day, my dear man." The lines of her still quite young and attractive face hardened in keeping with her thoughts. "I suppose I've had my chance. We're all of a pattern and I'm as crooked as any of you now."

"No, no," protested Kato loyally; "not you of yourself. It is we bad fellows round you. Darragh ought never to have brought you into these things, and then to despise you for your troubles—that is why my temper now and then ju-jitsues me. This time it is the worst of all—the young man Hulse, for whose benefit you pass yourself as the sister of your husband. How any mortal man possessing you——"

"Another cigarette, Katie, please," interrupted Violet, for the monotonous voice had become slightly more penetrating than was prudent. "That's all in the way of business, my friend. We aren't a firm of family solicitors. Jack Hulse had to be fascinated and I—well, if there is any hitch I don't think that it can be called my fault," and she demonstrated for his benefit the bewitching smile that had so effectually enslaved the ardent Beringer.

"Fascinated!" retorted Kato, fixing on the word jealously, and refusing to be pacified by the bribery of the

smile. "Yes, so infatuated has become this very susceptible young man that you lead him about like pet lamb at the end of blue ribbon. Business? Perhaps. But *how* have you been able to do this, Violet? And you husband—Darragh—to him simply business, very good business—and he forces you to do this full of shame thing and mocks at you for reward."

"Kato, Kato——" urged Violet, breaking through his scornful laughter.

"I am what your people call yellow man," continued Kato relentlessly, "and you are the one white woman of my dreams—dreams that I would not lift finger to spoil by trying to make real. But if I should have been Darragh not ten thousand times the ten thousand pounds that Hulse carries would tempt me to lend you to another man's arms."

"Oh, Katie, how horrid you can be!"

"Horrid for me to say, but 'business' for you to do! How have you discovered so much, Violet—what Hulse carries, where he carries it, the size and shape the packet makes, even the way he so securely keeps it? 'Business' eh? Your husband cares not so long as we succeed. But I, Kato Kuromi, care." He went nearer so that his mere attitude was menacing as he stood over her, and his usually smooth voice changed to a tone she had never heard there before. "*How* have you learned all this? How, unless you and Hulse——"

" 'Sssh!" she exclaimed in sharp dismay as her ear caught a sound beyond.

"—oh yes," continued Kato easily, his voice instantly as soft and unconcerned as ever, "it will be there, you mean. The views in the valley of Kedu are considered very fine and the river itself——"

It was Darragh whom Violet had heard approaching, and he entered the room in a much better temper than

he had left it. At the door he paused a moment to encourage someone forward—a seedy, diffident man of more than middle age, who carried a brown-paper parcel.

"Come on, Sim; hurry up, man!" urged Darragh impatiently, but without the sting of contempt that had poisoned his speech before. "And, oh, Phillips"—looking back and dropping his voice—"when Mr. Hulse arrives show him into the morning-room at first. Not up here, you understand? Now, Sims."

After a rather helpless look round for something suitable on which to lay his parcel, the woebegone-looking individual was attempting to untie it on an upraised knee.

"Yes, sir," he replied, endeavouring to impart a modicum of briskness into his manner. "I'm sorry to be a bit late, sir; I was delayed."

"Oh, well, never mind that now," said Darragh magnanimously. "Thing quite all right?"

"Mrs. Sims isn't worse?" asked Violet kindly.

Mr. Sims managed to get his back to the group before he ventured to reply.

"No, miss," he said huskily; "she's better now. She's dead: died an hour ago. That's why I wasn't quite able to get here by eight."

From each of his hearers this tragedy drew a characteristic response. Violet gave a little moan of sympathy and turned away. Kato regarded Sims, and continued to regard him, with the tranquil incuriosity of the unpitying East. Darragh—Darragh alone spoke, and his tone was almost genial.

"Devilish lucky that you were able to get here by now in the circumstances, Sims," he said.

"Well, sir," replied Sims practically, "you see, I shall need the money just as much now—though not quite for the same purpose as I had planned." He took the gar-

ment from the paper and shook it out before displaying it for Darragh's approval. "I think you will find that quite satisfactory, sir."

"Exactly the same as the one your people made for Mr. Hulse a week ago?" asked Darragh, glancing at the jacket and then passing it on to Violet for her verdict.

"To a stitch, sir. A friend of mine up at the shop got the measurements and the cloth is a length from the same piece."

"But the cut, Sims," persisted his patron keenly; "the cut is the most important thing about it. It makes all the difference in the world."

"Yes, sir," acquiesced Sims dispassionately; "you can rely on that. I used to be a first-class cutter myself before I took to drink. I am yet, when I'm steady. And I machined both coats myself."

"That should do then," said Darragh complacently. "Now you were to have——"

"Ten guineas and the cost of the cloth you promised, sir. Of course it's a very big price, and I won't deny that I've been a bit uneasy about it from time to time when I——"

"That's all right." Darragh had no wish to keep Mr. Sims in evidence a minute longer than was necessary.

"I shouldn't like to be doing anything wrong, sir," persisted the poor creature; "and when you stipulated that it wasn't to be mentioned——"

"Well, well, man; it's a bet, didn't I tell you? I stand to win a clear hundred if I can fool Hulse over this coat. That's the long and short of it."

"I'm sure I hope it is, sir. I've never been in trouble for anything yet, and it would break my wife's 'art——" He stopped suddenly and his weak face changed to a recollection of his loss; then without another word he turned and made shakily for the door.

"See him safely away, Katty, and pay him down below," said Darragh. "I'll settle with you later," and the Japanese, with a careless "All right-o," followed.

"Now, Violet, slip into it," continued her husband briskly. "We don't want to keep Hulse waiting when he comes." From a drawer in a cabinet near at hand he took a paper packet, prepared in readiness, and passed it to her. "You have the right cotton?"

"Yes, Hugh," said Violet, opening a little work-basket. She had already satisfied herself that the coat was a replica of the one the young American would wear, and she now transferred the dummy package to the corresponding pocket and with a few deft stitches secured it in the same way as she had already learned that the real contents were safeguarded. "And, Hugh——"

"Well, well?" responded Darragh, with a return of his old impatience.

"I don't wish to know all your plans, Hugh," continued Violet meekly, "but I do want to warn you. You are running a most tremendous risk with Kato."

"Oh, Kato!"

"It is really serious, Hugh. You don't believe in patriotism, I know, but Kato happens to. When he learns that it isn't ten thousand pounds at all, but confidential war plans, that this scoop consists of, something terrible may happen."

"It might, Violet. Therefore I haven't told him, and I am so arranging things that he will never know. Cheer up, my girl, there will be no tragedy. All the same, thanks for the hint. It shows a proper regard for your husband's welfare."

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh," murmured Violet, "if only you were more often——"

Whatever might have been the result—if indeed there was yet hope in an appeal to another and a better nature

that he might once have possessed—it came too late. The words were interrupted by the sudden reappearance of Kato, his business with Sims completed. He opened and closed the door quietly but very quickly, and at a glance both the Darraghs saw that something unforeseen had happened.

"Here's pretty go," reported the Japanese. "Hulse just come and brought someone with him!"

For a moment all the conspirators stood aghast at the unexpected complication. Hugh Darragh was the first to speak.

"Damnation!" he exclaimed, with a terrible look in his wife's direction; "that may upset everything. What ghastly muddle have you made now?"

"I—I don't know," pleaded Violet weakly. "I never dreamt of such a thing. Are you sure?"

"Slow man," amplified Kato with a nod. "Fellow who walk——" He made a few steps with studied deliberation.

"Blind! It's Max Carrados," exclaimed Violet, in a flash of enlightenment. "They have been great friends lately and Jack has often spoken of him. He's most awfully clever in his way, but stone blind. Hugh, Kato, don't you see? It's rather unfortunate his being here, but it can't really make any difference."

"True, if he is quite blind," admitted Kato.

"I'll look into it," said Darragh briskly. "Coat's all ready for you, Kato."

"I think no, yet," soliloquised the Japanese, critically examining it. "Keep door, 'alf-a-mo', Violet, if please." His own contribution to the coat's appearance was simple but practical—a gentle tension here and there, a general rumple, a dust on the floor and a final shake. "One week wear," he announced gravely as he changed into it and hid his own away.

"Take your time, Mr. Carrados," Darragh's voice was heard insisting on the stairs outside, and the next moment he stood just inside the room, and before Hulse had quite guided Carrados into view, drew Violet's attention to the necessity of removing the button-hole that the Americans still wore by a significant movement to the lapel of his own coat. It required no great finesse on the girl's part to effect the transfer of the little bunch of flowers to her own person within five minutes of the guests' arrival.

"A new friend to see you, Violet—Mr. Carrados," announced Darragh most graciously. "Mr. Carrados, my sister."

"Not to *see* you exactly, Miss Darragh," qualified Carrados. "But none the less to know you as well as if I did, I hope."

"I wanted you to meet Max before I went, Miss Darragh," explained Hulse; "so I took the liberty of bringing him round."

"You really *are* going then?" she asked.

"Yes. There seems no doubt about it this time. Twelve hours from now I hope to be in Paris. I should say," amended the ingenuous young man, "I *dread* to be in Paris, for it may mean a long absence. That's where I rely on Carrados to become what is called a 'connecting file' between us—to cheer my solitude by letting me know when he has met you, or heard of you, or, well, anything in fact."

"Take care, Mr. Hulse," she said. "Gallantry by proxy is a dangerous game."

"That's just it," retorted Hulse. "Max is the only man I shouldn't be jealous of—because he can't see you!"

While these amiable exchanges were being carried on between the two young people, with Max Carrados

standing benignly by, Darragh found an opportunity to lower his voice for Kato's benefit.

"It's all right about him," he declared. "We carry on."

"As we arranged?" asked Kato.

"Yes; exactly. Come across now." He raised his voice as he led Kato towards the other group. "I don't think that either of you has met Mr. Kuromi yet—Mr. Hulse, Mr. Carrados."

"I have been pining to meet you for weeks, sir," responded Hulse with enthusiasm. "Mr. Darragh tells me what a wonderful master of ju-jitsu you are."

"Oh, well; little knack, you know," replied Kato modestly. "You are interested?"

"Yes, indeed. I regard it as a most useful accomplishment at any time and particularly now. I only wish I'd taken it up when I had the leisure."

"Let me find you an easy-chair, Mr. Carrados," said Violet attentively. "I am sure that *you* won't be interested in so strenuous a subject as ju-jitsu."

"Oh, yes, I am, though," protested the blind man. "I am interested in everything."

"But surely——"

"I can't actually see the ju-jitsuing, you would say? Quite true, but do you know, Miss Darragh, that makes a great deal less difference than you might imagine. I have my sense of touch, my sense of taste, my hearing—even my unromantic nose—and you would hardly believe how they have rallied to my assistance since sight went. For instance——"

They had reached the chair to which Miss Darragh had piloted him. To guide him into it she had taken both his hands, but now Carrados had gently disengaged himself and was lightly holding her left hand between both of his.

"For instance, Hulse and I were speaking of you the other day—forgive our impertinence—and he happened to mention that you disliked rings of any sort and had never worn one. His eyes, you see, and perhaps a careless remark on your part. Now I *know* that until quite recently you continually wore a ring upon this finger."

Silence had fallen upon the other men as they followed Carrados's exposition. Into the moment of embarrassment that succeeded this definite pronouncement Mr. Hulse threw a cheerful note.

"Oh ho, Max, you've come a cropper this time," he exclaimed. "Miss Darragh has never worn a ring. Have you?"

"N-o," replied Violet, a little uncertain of her ground, as the blind man continued to smile benevolently upon her.

"A smooth and rather broad one," he continued persuasively. "Possibly a wedding ring?"

"Wait a minute, Violet, wait a minute," interposed Darragh, endeavouring to look judicially wise with head bent to one side. He was doubtful if Violet could carry the point without incurring some suspicion, and he decided to give her a lead out of it. "Didn't I see you wearing some sort of plain ring a little time ago? You have forgotten, but I really believe Mr. Carrados may be right. Think again."

"Of course!" responded Violet readily; "how stupid of me! It was my mother's wedding ring. I found it in an old desk and wore it to keep it safe. That was really how I found out that I could not bear the feel of one and I soon gave it up."

"What did I say?" claimed Darragh genially. "I thought that we should be right."

"This is really much interesting," said Kato. "I very greatly like your system, Mr. Carrados."

"Oh, it's scarcely a system," deprecated Max good-naturedly; "it's almost second nature with me now. I don't have to consider, say, 'Where is the window?' if I want it. I know with certainty that the window lies over here." He had not yet taken the chair provided, and suiting the action to the word he now took a few steps towards the wall where the windows were. "Am I not right?" And to assure himself he stretched out a hand and encountered the heavy curtains.

"Yes, yes," admitted Violet hurriedly, "but, oh, please do be careful, Mr. Carrados. They are most awfully particular about the light here since the last raid. We go in fear and trembling lest a glimmer should escape."

Carrados smiled and nodded and withdrew from the dangerous area. He faced the room again.

"Then there is the electric light—heat at a certain height of course."

"True," assented Kato, "but why *electric* light?"

"Because no other is noiseless and entirely without smell; think—gas, oil, candles, all betray their composition yards away. Then"—indicating the fireplace—"I suppose you can only smell soot in damp weather? The mantelpiece"—touching it—"inlaid marble. The wall-paper"—brushing his hand over its surface—"arrangement of pansies on a criss-cross background"; lifting one finger to his lips—"colour scheme largely green and gold."

Possibly Mr. Hulse thought that his friend had demonstrated his qualities quite enough. Possibly—at any rate he now created a diversion:

"Engraving of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, suspended two feet seven inches from the ceiling on a brass-headed nail supplied by a one-legged ironmonger whose Aunt Jane——"

All contributed a sufficiently appreciative laugh—

Carrados's not the least hearty—except Kato, whose Asiatic dignity was proof against the form of jesting.

"You see what contempt familiarity breeds, Miss Darragh," remarked the blind man. "I look to you, Mr. Kuromi, to avenge me by putting Hulse in a variety of undignified attitudes on the floor."

"Oh, I shan't mind that if at the same time you put me up to a trick or two," said Hulse, turning to the Japanese.

"You wish?"

"Indeed I do. I've seen the use of it. It's good; it's scientific. When I was crossing, one of the passengers held up a bully twice his weight in the neatest way possible. It looked quite simple, something like this, if I may?" Kato nodded his grave assent and submitted himself to Mr. Hulse's vigorous grasp. "'Now,' said the man I'm speaking of, 'struggle and your right arm's broken.' But I expect you know the grip?"

"Oh, yes," replied Kato, veiling his private amusement, "and therefore foolish to struggle. Expert does not struggle; gives way." He appeared to do so, to be falling helplessly in fact, but the assailant found himself compelled to follow, and the next moment he was lying on his back with Kato politely extending a hand to assist him up again.

"I must remember that," said Hulse thoughtfully. "Let me see, it goes—do you mind putting me wise on that again, Mr. Kuromi? The motion picture just one iota slower this time, please."

For the next ten or twenty minutes the demonstration went on in admirable good humour, and could Max Carrados have seen he would certainly have witnessed his revenge. At the end of the lesson both men were warm and dusty—so dusty that Miss Darragh felt called upon to apologise laughingly for the condition of the rug. But

if clothes were dusty, hands were positively dirty—there was no other word for it.

"No, really, the poor mat can't be so awful as that," declared the girl. "Wherever have you been, Mr. Kuromi? and, oh, Mr. Hulse you are just as bad."

"I do not know," declared Kato, regarding his grimy fingers seriously. "Nowhere of myself. Yes, I think it must be your London atmosphere among the rug after all."

"At all events you can't—— Oh, Hugh, take them to the bathroom, will you? And I'll try to entertain Mr. Carrados meanwhile—only he will entertain me instead, I know."

It was well and simply done throughout—nothing forced, and the sequence of development quite natural. Indeed, it was not until Hulse saw Kuromi take off his coat in the bathroom that he even thought of what he carried. "Well, Carrados," he afterwards pleaded to his friend, "now could I wash my hands before those fellows like a guy who isn't used to washing? It isn't natural. It isn't human." So for those few minutes the two coats hung side by side, and Darragh kindly brushed them. When Hulse put on his own again his hand instinctively felt for the hidden packet; his fingers reassured themselves among the familiar objects of his pockets, and his mind was perfectly at ease.

"You old scoundrel, Max," he said, when he returned to the drawing room. "You told Kuromi to wipe the floor with me and, by crumbs, he did! Have a cigarette all the same."

Miss Darragh laughed pleasantly and took the opportunity to move away to learn from her accomplices if all had gone well. Carrados was on the point of passing over the proffered olive branch when he changed his mind. He leaned forward and with slow deliberation

chose a cigarette from the American's case. Exactly when the first subtle monition of treachery reached him —by what sense it was conveyed—Hulse never learned, for there were experiences among the finer perceptions that the blind man did not willingly discuss. Not by voice or outward manner in that arresting moment did he betray an inkling of his suspicion, yet by some responsive telephony Hulse at once, though scarcely conscious of it then, grew uneasy and alert.

"Thanks; I'll take a light from yours," remarked Carrados, ignoring the lit match, and he rose to avail himself. His back was towards the others, who still had a word of instruction to exchange. With cool precision he handled the cloth on Hulse's outstretched arm, critically touched the pocket he was already familiar with, and then deliberately drew the lapel to his face.

"You wore some violets?" he said beneath his breath.

"Yes," replied Hulse, "but I—Miss Darragh——"

"But there never have been any *here!* By heavens, Hulse, we're in it! You had your coat off just now?"

"Yes, for a minute——"

"Quietly. Keep your cigarette going. You'll have to leave this to me. Back me up—discreetly—whatever I do."

"Can't we challenge it and insist——"

"Not in this world. They have at least one other man downstairs—in Cairo, a Turk by the way, before I was blind, of course. Not up to Mr. Kuromi, I expect——"

"Cool again?" asked Miss Darragh sociably. It was her approach that had sent Carrados off into irrelevancies. "Was the experience up to anticipation?"

"Yes, I think I may say it was," admitted Hulse guardedly. "There is certainly a lot to learn here. I expect you've seen it all before?"

"Oh, no. It is a great honour to get Mr. Kuromi to 'show it off,' as he quaintly calls it."

"Yes, I should say so," replied the disillusioned young man with deadly simplicity. "I quite feel that."

"J. B. H. is getting strung up," thought Carrados. "He may say something unfortunate presently." So he deftly insinuated himself into the conversation and for a few minutes the commonplaces of the topic were rigidly maintained.

"Care for a hand at auction?" suggested Darragh, joining the group. He had no desire to keep his guests a minute longer than he need, but at the same time it was his line to behave quite naturally until they left. "Oh, but I forgot—Mr. Carrados——"

"I am well content to sit and listen," Carrados assured him. "Consider how often I have to do that without the entertainment of a game to listen to! And you are four without me."

"It really hardly seems——" began Violet.

"I'm sure Max will feel it if he thinks that he is depriving us," put in Hulse loyally, so with some more polite protestation it was arranged and the game began, Carrados remaining where he was. In the circumstances a very high standard of bridge could not be looked for; the calling was a little wild; the play more than a little loose; the laughter rather shrill or rather flat; the conversation between the hands forced and spasmodic. All were playing for time in their several interpretations of it; the blind man alone was thinking beyond the immediate moment.

Presently there was a more genuine burst of laughter than any hitherto. Kato had revoked, and, confronted with it, had made a naïve excuse. Carrados rose with the intention of going nearer when a distressing thing occurred. Half-way across the room he seemed to slip,

plunged forward helplessly, and came to the floor, involved in a light table as he fell. All the players were on their feet in an instant. Darragh assisted his guest to rise; Violet took an arm; Kato looked about the floor curiously, and Hulse—Hulse stared hard at Max and wondered what the thunder this portended.

"Clumsy, clumsy," murmured Carrados beneath his breath. "Forgive me, Miss Darragh."

"Oh, Mr. Carrados!" she exclaimed in genuine distress. "Aren't you really hurt?"

"Not a bit of it," he declared lightly. "Or at all events," he amended, bearing rather more heavily upon her support as he took a step, "nothing to speak of."

"Here is pencil," said Kuromi, picking one up from the polished floor. "You must have slipped on this."

"Stepping on a pencil is like that," contributed Hulse wisely. "It acts as a kind of roller-skate."

"Please don't interrupt the game any more," pleaded the victim. "At the most, at the very worst, it is only—oh!—a negligible strain."

"I don't know that any strain, especially of the ankle, is negligible, Mr. Carrados," said Darragh with cunning foresight. "I think it perhaps ought to be seen to."

"A compress when I get back will be all that is required," maintained Carrados. "I should hate to break up the evening."

"Don't consider that for a moment," urged the host hospitably. "If you really think that it would be wiser in the end——"

"Well, perhaps——" assented the other, weakening in his resolution.

"Shall I 'phone up a taxi?" asked Violet.

"Thank you, if you would be so kind—or, no; perhaps my own car would be rather easier in the circum-

stances. My man will be about, so that it will take very little longer."

"I'll get through for you," volunteered Darragh. "What's your number?"

The telephone was in a corner of the room. The connection was soon obtained and Darragh turned to his guest for the message.

"I'd better speak," said Carrados—he had limped across on Hulse's arm—taking over the receiver. "Excellent fellow, but he'd probably conclude that I'd been killed. . . . That you, Parkinson? . . . Yes, at 155 Densham Gardens. I'm held up here by a slight accident. . . . No, no, nothing serious, but I might have some difficulty in getting back without assistance. Tell Harris I shall need him after all, as soon as he can get here—the car that's handiest. That's—oh, and, Parkinson, bring along a couple of substantial walking-sticks with you. Any time now. That's all. . . . Yes . . . yes." He put up the receiver with a thrill of satisfaction that he had got his message safely through. "Held up"—a phrase at once harmless and significant—was the arranged shift-key into code. It was easy for a blind man to receive some hurt that held him up. Once or twice Carrados's investigations had got him into tight places, but in one way or another he had invariably got out again.

"How far is your place away?" someone asked, and out of the reply a time-marking conversation on the subject of getting about London's darkened streets and locomotion in general arose. Under cover of this Kato drew Darragh aside to the deserted card-table.

"Not your pencil, Darragh?" he said quietly, displaying the one he had picked up.

"No; why?"

"I not altogether like this, is why," replied the Japa-

nese. "I think it Carrados own pencil. That man have too many ways of doing things, Darragh. It was mistake to let him 'phone."

"Oh, nonsense; you heard what he said. Don't get jumpy, man. The thing has gone like clockwork."

"So far, yes. But I think I better go now and come back in one hour or so, safer for all much."

Darragh, for very good reasons, had the strongest objections to allowing his accomplice an opportunity of examining the spoil alone. "Look here, Katty," he said with decision, "I must have you in case there does come a scrimmage. I'll tell Phillips to fasten the front door well, and then we can see that it's all right before anyone comes in. If it is, there's no need for you to run away; if there's the least doubt we can knock these two out and have plenty of time to clear by the back way we've got." Without giving Kato any chance of raising further objection he turned to his guests again.

"I think I remember your tastes, Hulse," he said suavely. "I hope that you have no objection to Scotch whisky, Mr. Carrados? We still have a few bottles left. Or perhaps you prefer champagne?"

Carrados had very little intention of drinking anything in that house, nor did he think that with ordinary procrastination it would be necessary.

"You are very kind," he replied tentatively. "Should you permit the invalid either, Miss Darragh?"

"Oh, yes, in moderation," she smiled. "I think I hear your car," she added, and stepping to the window ventured to peep out.

It was true. Mr. Darragh had run it a shade too fine for once. For a moment he hesitated which course to take—to see who was arriving or to convey a warning to his henchman down below. He had turned towards

the door when Violet's startled voice recalled him to the window.

"Hugh!" she called sharply. "Here, Hugh;" and as he reached her, in a breathless whisper, "There are men inside the car—two more at least."

Darragh had to decide very quickly this time. His choice was not without its element of fineness. "Go down and see about it, Katty," he said, looking Kato straight in the eyes. "And tell Phillips about the whisky."

"Door locked," said the Japanese tersely. "Key other side."

"The key was on this side," exclaimed Darragh fiercely. "Hulse——"

"Hell!" retorted Beringer expressively. "That jacket doesn't go out of the room without me this journey."

Darragh had him covered before he had finished speaking.

"Quick," he rapped out. "I'll give you up to three, and if the key isn't out then, by God, I'll plug you, Hulse! One, two——"

The little "ping!" that followed was not the automatic speaking, but the release of the electric light switch as Carrados, unmarked among this climax, pressed it up. In the absolute blackness that followed Darragh spun round to face the direction of this new opponent.

"Shoot by all means, Mr. Darragh, if you are used to firing in the dark," said Carrados's imperturbable voice. "But in any case remember that I am. As I am a dead shot by sound, perhaps everyone had better remain exactly where he—or she, I regret to have to add, Miss Darragh—now is."

"You dog!" spat out Darragh.

"I should not even talk," advised the blind man. "I

am listening for my friends and I might easily mistake your motive among the hum of conversation."

He had not long to wait. In all innocence Phillips had opened the door to Parkinson, and immeasurably to his surprise two formidable-looking men of official type had followed in from somewhere. By a sort of instinct—or possibly a momentary ray of light had been their guide—they came direct to the locked door.

"Parkinson," called Carrados.

"Yes, sir," replied that model attendant.

"We are all in here; Mr. Hulse and myself, and three—I am afraid that I can make no exception—three unfriendlies. At the moment the electric light is out of action, the key of the locked door has been mislaid, and firearms are being promiscuously flourished in the dark. That is the position. Now if you have the key, Hulse——"

"I have," replied Hulse grimly, "but for a fact I dropped it down my neck out of harm's way and where the plague it's got to——"

As it happened the key was not required. The heavier of the officers outside, believing in the element of surprise, stood upon one foot and shot the other forward with the force and action of an engine piston-rod. The shattered door swung inward and the three men rushed into the room.

Darragh had made up his mind, and as the door crashed he raised his hand to fire into the thick. But at that moment the light flashed on again and almost instantly was gone. Before his dazzled eyes and startled mind could adjust themselves to this he was borne down. When he rose again his hands were manacled.

"So," he breathed laboriously, bending a vindictive eye upon his outwitter. "When next we meet it will be my turn, I think."

"We shall never meet again," replied Carrados impassively. "There is no other turn for you, Darragh."

"But where the blazes has Kuromi got to?" demanded Hulse with sharp concern. "He can't have quit?"

One of the policemen walked to a table in the farthest corner of the room, looked down beyond it, and silently raised a beckoning hand. They joined him there.

"Rum way these foreigners have of doing things," remarked the other disapprovingly. "Now who the Hanover would ever think of a job like that?"

"I suppose," mused the blind man, as he waited for the official arrangements to go through, "that presently I shall have to live up to Hulse's overwhelming bewonderment. And yet if I pointed out to him that the button-hole of the coat he is now wearing still has a stitch in it to keep it in shape and could not by any possibility . . . Well, well, perhaps better not. It is a mistake for the conjurer to explain."

Preston Beach, 1917.

VI

Revolution

THE night was blusterous with sudden squalls and gusts of rain, and intervals when the full moon rode serene among scurrying clouds. It being past midnight, Paris slept, but slept lightly, for the period was that of the autumn of 1793. Few wayfarers were to be seen, and those who were about moved both quickly and warily as though engaged on business of danger and despatch.

At a corner of the Rue S. Michael two men, coming from opposite directions, were caught by the full force of an eddying blast, and in a moment two hats were careering along the street with their owners in angry pursuit. Each man seized the first that came to hand, crammed it upon his head more firmly than before, and sought the nearest doorway to regain breath and composure before continuing his journey. Then, as they had taken refuge beneath the same arch, each began to regard the other, as men mostly did in those days, a little suspiciously at first.

"A stormy night, citizen," remarked the more sociable of the two.

"Stormy times altogether," replied the other. "But surely, citizen, your voice is somehow familiar to me. Bless my soul, it cannot be——?"

"Philippe Buton, citizen. And you——?"

"Dumont—your old friend of the office in the Place

du Temple—Louis Dumont. Surely you have not forgotten?"

"Forgotten! I should think not. And is it really you, Dumont, after all these years? A strange chance that brings us thus together!"

"Strange indeed! And wearing each other's hat, it would appear. At least, this one feels uncommonly tight to me."

"I believe you are right, Louis. There is an unusual roominess in the one that I have on——" They laughed and exchanged hats, and Buton resumed, "Since we must exchange hats, we may as well exchange confidences. What brings you here at this hour?"

"Agreed," responded Dumont. "All the same, you are about the only man to whom I would care to confide the nature of my errand. Briefly, it is a matter of the public good and of private vengeance."

"Vengeance?"

"Just retribution, let us rather say. In the years since we lost sight of one another, Philippe, I have become married——"

"I congratulate you!"

"You have small reason to do so. I do not speak of it more than is necessary. You understand? The man on whom I would be avenged is an aristocrat. At his hands I have suffered a wrong which nothing but his death can satisfy. And I have justice on my side, Philippe; justice and morality and the public welfare. Already this beggarly marquis has been condemned by the Committee, and his execution is only a matter of bringing him to trial. But he fled, and for six months has been abroad. Now, by the merest chance, I have heard something from which I gather that he has secretly returned and at this moment is in Paris."

"I see," interrupted Buton. "And you would seek out

the scoundrel and settle accounts with him before the guillotine robs you of that satisfaction."

"Not so fast," replied Dumont dryly. "Why should I take the risk? And ten to one he would decline to cross swords with me. No, Buton, so long as he dies it is not a great matter how. Indeed, an end at the hands of the public executioner is the more ignominious and therefore the better way. Once I am certain of his presence I have only to convey a word and the thing is done."

It was now Buton's turn to explain his errand. He, also, would have spoken with reserve, but Dumont's confidence and the trust which he reposed in his former friend encouraged him to be no less open.

"What you tell me makes our meeting all the more curious," he remarked, "for I too am on my way to find a proscribed aristocrat. There is this difference, however, that whereas you very justly would destroy a worthless libertine, my errand is to give timely warning to a virtuous nobleman whose chivalrous protection of my family, even at the risk of his own life, has placed me under an everlasting obligation."

"A dangerous business in these times," remarked Dumont significantly.

"Otherwise there would be little merit in it. However, Dumont, I am as good a citizen as you at heart, and to prove it I will accompany you and take part in whatever risk your adventure may entail."

"Good. And to show you that I am no less broad-minded, Philippe, I will also join forces with you in your enterprise, and back you up if it should be necessary."

They had walked along as they conversed, and by this time had reached the end of the street, where they paused, each waiting for the other to indicate the direction he would take.

"I go by the Rue des Murailles," said Dumont, "but perhaps you——?"

"Not at all," replied Buton. "That is my way also."

A little farther on Dumont stopped at the corner of a narrow by-way.

"This leads through to the Place de Chaumont, where my fox has gone to earth," he said. "Shall we get on with my affair first as it lies nearest?"

"Certainly," assented his companion. "But it is to the Place de Chaumont that my errand also takes us."

"The house opposite the lead fountain——"

"The same."

"I mean that that is where the Marquis de Salais hides."

"Quite so," agreed Buton, with his mind full of his own affair. "As we are so near we may as well take my business first and warn him."

"Warn? Damnation! He is the man whom we have come to deliver up!"

For a moment the two adventurers stared at one another in a common emotion of dismay.

"Well," exclaimed Buton, "here's a pretty kettle of fish!"

"It's plain that we can't both succeed," assented Dumont.

"And our plan for mutual support would seem to present difficulties."

"I confess I don't see what we are to do. If de Salais is capable of the exalted behaviour with which you credit him——"

"But if, on the other hand, he is really the depraved voluptuary that you have reason to——"

"What's all the row about?" growled a rough voice from behind. "Can't you go somewhere else than on a man's own doorstep to quarrel over him?"

Half unconsciously they had been proceeding on their mutual way and they now stood, without up to that time being aware of it, by the house opposite the lead fountain. The door was open and a citizen of burly aspect lounged within the shadow.

"This—this is where M. le Marquis—Citizen Salais, that is to say, lodges then?" stammered Dumont.

"So I am now told. But citizen or marquis he's flown —cleared off for le Mans six hours ago."

"Le Mans!" shrieked Dumont. "Why, my wife is at le Mans. I sent her there for safety!"

"But, good heavens! Mascot, who knows him well by sight, went to le Mans only yesterday," faltered Buton. "He has walked straight into the lion's mouth."

"He really has gone?" demanded Dumont of the doorkeeper, with an excess of suspicion.

The burly individual stood aside.

"Oh, go up and see for yourselves," he suggested caustically. "First chamber to the front. Don't stand on any ceremony, honest citizens; everyone in Paris goes in and out everywhere, just as he pleases, nowadays. Step up, and don't forget to look up the chimney while you're about it."

Under his sardonic insistence the two friends found themselves making their way into de Salais's deserted room. Dumont picked up a lamp from a bracket on the stairs and held it aloft. Plainly the marquis was gone, and by the evidence around he had left hurriedly, for many of his gay belongings lay flung about the room.

"Upon my word, these aristocrats were a set of peacocks," exclaimed Dumont, in half-envious contempt. "Look at this pearl silk waistcoat, and this blue satin coat, and this hat! I fancy myself in this get-up, Philippe. Let's see how it suits."

He slipped off his own upper garments and drew on

those that had taken his fancy. Not to seem to stand aloof Buton followed his example, and tried the effect of a canary-coloured coat, with elaborate lace frillings. As they were thus engaged there was an irregular tramp of feet in the square outside. Then a "Halt!"

The half-intoxicated officer in charge of the handful of undisciplined rascality lurched across to the doorway opposite the lead fountain.

"The so-called Marquis de Salais—which is his room, citizen?" he demanded.

"First to the front," replied the doorkeeper stolidly.

"There's something going on out there," said Dumont, as the "Halt!" reached them. Then he opened the window and stepped out on to the balcony.

"Prepare—fire!" commanded the officer.

"Good God!" exclaimed Buton. "They're mistaking him——" Then he too stepped through the window to shout a warning.

"Diable, another marquis!" exclaimed the officer in vinous bewilderment. "Squad—fire again!"

The squad fired again, and Buton fell lifeless across the figure in the blue satin coat.

Hastings, 1915.

VII

Smothered in Corpses

The author of the following story deems it permissible to himself to explain that the work was projected, and, indeed, almost completed, as a 120,000 word serial of feuilleton scope, when a much-advertised competition for stories of not more than 4000 words in length came under his notice. Not to be deterred by the conditions, he at once set himself to the formidable task of reducing his manuscript to one-thirtieth of its original length. The result must, of course, be regarded purely on its merits, but in the writer's own opinion the process of compression has, if anything, keyed up the action to an even tenser pitch, without in any way detracting from the interest of the plot or circumscribing the wealth of incident.

I

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

WHERE had it come from?

I, John Beveledge Humdrum, general practitioner, of 305A, Hammersmith Road, Kensington, had come down to breakfast on that eventful July morning expecting nothing more exciting than the eggs and bacon with which my excellent man Perkins had regularly provided me on similar occasions for the past eleven years.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, on throwing open the door of the book-case that contained my sparse collection of medical works, in order to consult *Abernethy on Biscuits,* to be confronted by the doubled-up corpse of a

young man of distinguished appearance, wearing a suit of evening clothes of the most expensive cut.

My thoughts flew back to the events of the previous evening in an attempt to unravel the mystery. Had anything remarkable happened? And then I remembered an incident, trivial enough in itself, which might supply a clue. At about eight o'clock I had received a professional summons, notable as being the first in my career. A heavily-veiled woman wearing a complete set of massive ermines had descended from a magnificently-appointed motor-car before my door. In response to her impassioned appeal, delivered with a marked Castilian accent, I had accompanied her to a miserable tenement dwelling in a sordid Limehouse slum. Here, after I had reluctantly given a pledge of secrecy and permitted myself to be blindfolded (even to this day the mingled aroma of Enigma Vanishing Cream and frying spaghetti vividly recalls the scene), I was taken to the bedside of my patient, a fair-haired boy of three or four. A villainous-looking Chinaman who was in attendance gave me to understand, partly by signs and partly in pidgin English, that the child had swallowed a bone button. Being unacquainted with the exact treatment of such a case I recommended his removal to the nearest hospital. As there was nothing more to detain me I left at once, overwhelmed by the passionate gratitude of my mysterious caller; but as I glanced back at the corner of the disreputable street, I saw a face charged with diabolical hatred watching me from the grimy window of the room I had just quitted. It was the visage of the aged Chinaman, who but a moment before had been bowing to me with true Oriental deference. As I looked, rather puzzled to account for his strange behaviour, a terrible explosion shook the ground, the front of the house disappeared, and a singed pigtail fell at my feet.

Recalling all this I was on the point of ringing for Perkins in order to question him, when something caused me to hesitate.

It was well that I did so. The next moment the double doors of the French window that overlooked the bustling turmoil of Kensington's busiest thoroughfare were flung frantically open and there sprang into the room a young girl whose dazzling beauty was, if possible, heightened by the breathless excitement under which she was labouring.

"Dr. Humdrum," she exclaimed, throwing aside the luxuriant crimson opera cloak that had hitherto concealed the supple perfection of her lithe form, "save me! Help me!" and a look of baffling terror swept across her mobile features.

"Certainly," I stammered, bewildered for the moment by this strange intrusion into the dull routine of my commonplace existence, "but first let me have your name and address for entering into my callers' book."

For reply she dragged from her finger a ring set with a cluster of diamonds that had once, as I was afterwards to learn, graced the crown of an Eastern potentate, and with impulsive generosity flung it into the coal-scuttle.

"Call me Erratica," she murmured, with a slightly different look of terror contorting her lovely features. (And here, for the sake of brevity, I would remark that during the first seven weeks of our strange friendship she either shook with terror or shivered with apprehension whenever she spoke to me or I to her.) "Seek to know no more. Only save me!"

I was at my wits' end. She had already, with a gesture of loathing, hurled out of the window the glass of sal volatile which I had poured out for her, and that exhausted the first-aid remedies with which I was familiar.

"Save you from what?"

"From my enemies. I saw them knocking at your door. That is why I came in by the window."

"Would it not have been more prudent——" I began.

"Hush!" she whispered, tapping her exquisitely-modelled musical comedy teeth with her shapely Italian forefinger. "They are at hand. Play your part well." Then, with unsuspected strength and a knowledge of the arrangements of my modest apartment that staggered me, she tore open the door of the book-case, flung the corpse that it contained on to my dissecting table, and without a moment's hesitation took its place and pulled the door to after her.

"Open in the name of the law!"

Rather perturbed as to what the fair creature required me to do, I obeyed the summons and was relieved to see before me the burly form of Inspector Badger of the Detective Service, an officer with whom I was well acquainted.

"Rum case, that of the murdered prima-donna, Dr. Humdrum," he remarked affably. As he spoke he took a seat on the corner of the dissecting table and thus, luckily enough, overlooked its grim burden in the glance of keen professional scrutiny that he cast round the room. "I thought that I'd just look you up and see if you knew anything about it before I ordered any arrests."

"Murdered prima-donna!" I stammered. "I haven't even heard of it. Surely you don't suspect——?"

"Suspect you?" said the Inspector with a hearty laugh. "Why, no, sir; but as it happens a bone button, wrapped in a sheet of paper bearing one of your prescriptions, had been used to gag the poor creature with. That and the yard of pigtail tied round her neck are our only clues as yet."

At the mention of these details I could not repress a start, which would scarcely have escaped Badger's notice

had he not been engaged at the moment in taking a wax impression of my boots.

"Tell me all about it," I remarked, with all the nonchalance I could muster. "I have heard nothing. Who is she?"

"Señora Rosamunda de Barcelona, the celebrated Spanish singer," replied the Inspector. "She left Covent Garden at half-past eleven last night, alone and wearing a crimson opera cloak."

"Surely that was rather late to be shopping," I interposed, with the happy inspiration of diverting his attention. "Would not the market then be closed?"

"I understand that there is a sort of play-house there, where a lot of these foreigners appear," he replied guardedly. "By the way now——"

Possibly the compromising garment lying on the floor between us would not have caught Badger's eye had I not endeavoured to kick it beneath the table. However, the thing was done.

"Ah, my old M.D. gown of the University of Ploughhandle, Ga., U.S.A.," I explained, with a readiness that astonishes me to this day, as I followed the direction of his glance. "I use it as a dressing-gown."

"Very natty too," he remarked. "Well, at seven this morning the Señora was discovered propped up in the vestibule of the Hotel Majestic, stabbed in eleven places."

"And the opera cloak?" I felt impelled to ask.

"The opera cloak had disappeared."

I rose to indicate that the instalment was almost complete. The Inspector took the hint.

"I'll look you up later in the day if anything really baffling turns up," he promised as he walked towards the door. Suddenly he paused and faced the book-case.

"What was that, sir? Didn't you hear a noise in the cupboard?"

"Search it by all means if you wish, Badger," I replied with the utmost sangfroid, "but it only contains my zinc ointment, ammoniated quinine—and—er—a little bundle of odds and ends. As for the noise—they have the chimney-sweep in next door."

"I shouldn't think of doubting your word, sir," said the Inspector. Then very coolly he locked the cupboard door without opening it and slipped the key into his pocket. "A mere formality, but just as well to be on the safe side," he observed.

When I returned to the room—I accompanied Badger to the outer door myself—I stood for a moment considering the new complication.

"Deuced awkward!" I muttered, walking towards the book-case.

"That will be all right, sir," interposed the soft voice of Perkins behind me. "The key of my wardrobe fits all the locks in your sitting-room—except that of the tantalus, I should say," and he held out the indicated object for me to take. Under what circumstances my exemplary man had made the discovery I did not stop to investigate, but I have no doubt that he had conscientiously listened to every word of one if not of both conversations that morning.

I did not lose a moment in unlocking the door of the book-case and throwing it widely open to release my fair visitor.

But the many-clawed hand of improbability had by no means relaxed its grip on my shoulder.

The cupboard was empty!

In speechless bewilderment my gaze went round the room from one familiar object to another in a vain attempt to solve the mystery. There was only one possible place of concealment there. I snatched away the coverlet that hid the stark outline on the dissecting table.

Imagine my surprise to see before me the corpse of the elderly Italian anarchist who had offered me a throat pastille on the grand stand at Hurlingham a month ago!

II

IN THE THICK OF IT

In spite of the passionate insistence with which Sybil (as I had now grown to call her) had reiterated that I should think of her no more, there were very few hours of the day or night that she was absent from my thoughts.

The all-too-brief moment that I had held her in my arms when I rescued her from the burning dope den in Montmorency Square had settled my fate for ever. The emotion that swept over me when I found that we had been decoyed together into the abandoned radium mine in Cornwall had, if anything, deepened the conviction; and when I discovered that it was she and no other who, at such tremendous risk to herself, had sent me the anonymous warning that saved me from being drugged and tattooed beyond recognition in the Bond Street beauty specialist's salon, I admitted that something stronger than myself was shaping our destinies.

The baffling enigma of Sybil's identity would alone have been sufficient to keep her continually in my mind, even if I had been disposed to forget. One morning, after I had vainly sought for a week, I discovered her. She was in charge of a novelty counter in the bargain basement of Harridge's stores, and so perfectly in harmony with her surroundings that it seemed impossible to suspect her of playing a part. Yet the same evening I caught her demure look of recognition across the table of a Cabinet Minister at a dinner given in honour of a

popular Ambassador. And had not Slavonski, on the memorable occasion of the Incog. Club raid, referred to her as "our trusty associate Mademoiselle Zero?" but, on the other hand, Inspector Badger had placed himself unreservedly under her guidance when she steered the river-police motor-launch in pursuit of the desperate "Hi-Hi!" gang. It was all very puzzling to me, plain John Humdrum, M.D., and when I now look back over that period I see that Sybil's friendship kept me very busy indeed.

Possibly something of the sort flashed across my mind one morning when I found on my breakfast table a note addressed in Sybil's characteristic hand. It was post-marked "Express Aerial Service. Tokio to Aberdeen," and franked "Urgent and Frantic" in violet ink. Stamps of the highest possible value were affixed wherever there was an inch of space in the dear girl's usual lavish manner. The enclosure, like all her business messages, was brief but decided.

"A great danger threatens," it ran. "Meet me at twelve to-night in the Mummy Room, British Museum.—Sybil."

Unfortunately it was not dated.

It was, therefore, in a rather doubtful frame of mind that I presented myself, shortly before midnight, at the formidable closed gates in Great Russell Street. A printed notice, read uncertainly by an adjacent street lamp, informed me that the galleries closed at six.

As I stood there in indecision an official emerged stealthily from the shadow of an angle in the wall, where he had evidently been awaiting me.

"That's all right, sir," was his welcome assurance, after he had flashed the light of an electric torch several times all over me. "The young lady has arranged everything."

Without further explanation he led the way across

the broad moonlit forecourt and then through several lofty galleries. Pausing before a massive door he unlocked it, pushed me inside, and I heard the fastening close to again with a soft metallic click.

Never before had the mysterious gloom of that ghostly rendezvous of the long-forgotten dead seemed so shadow-laden.

Sybil—it was she—came towards me with a glad cry.

"You are here!" she exclaimed. "How splendid; but I never for a moment doubted it."

"But why *here?*" I ventured to inquire, in my obtuse blundering way. "Would not Moggridge's or the Azalea Court of the Frangipane have been more up-to-date?"

She gave me a reproachful glance.

"Surely by this time you know that I am the most hunted woman in Europe, my good man," she answered with a touch of aristocratic insouciance. "My footsteps are being dogged by anarchists, vendettaists, Bolsheviks, Czecho-Slovaks, Black Hands, Hidden Hands, Scotland Yard, the Northcliffe Press and several of the more ambitious special constables. This is literally the one spot in London where we are safe from observation."

"How wonderful you are!" was wrung from me. "But will you not tell me what it all means?"

In her usual cryptic fashion Sybil answered one question by another.

"Will you do something for me?"

"Can you doubt it?" I asked reproachfully.

"I don't," she replied. "But all so far is insignificant compared with this. It will demand the reticence of a Government official combined with the resourcefulness of a District Messenger boy. This packet must be delivered to-night to the Admiral of the Fleet, stationed at Plyhampton. The fate of the navy, the army and the air service are all bound up in its safe arrival."

"I am ready," I said simply.

"A yellow motor-car, with one headlight green and the other red, will be waiting for you at the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street," she proceeded rapidly. "You will recognise it by the driver wearing a crimson opera hat—that being the secret badge of the male members of our Society. Get in and the rest is easy."

Even as she spoke a sudden look of terror swept across her features.

I followed her agonised glance to the nearest mummy case. It was, the label stated, that of an Egyptian priest of Mut, named Amen-Phat, but the pair of steely eyes that I encountered looking out of the painted mask were those of the Hindoo waiter who had upset the discarded toothpicks into the poisoned dish of caviare at the Grand Duke's reception.

I turned to convey my suspicions to Sybil, but to my surprise she had disappeared, and when I looked again the gilt face of Amen-Phat had resumed its accustomed placid stare.

One thing was clear. In my hand I held the fateful packet directed to the Admiral of the Fleet, and my duty was to find the driver of the yellow car and to make a dash for the coast at all hazard.

As I strode towards the door I recalled the ominous sound of re-locking that had followed my entrance. Was I in a trap?

Whatever had taken place, however, the door was no longer locked. It yielded to the pressure of my hand, but only for a few inches. Something was holding it from the other side. I exerted my strength and in another moment I had made a sufficient opening to allow my passage. The nature of the obstruction was then revealed. At my feet lay the body of a man. A ray of

green light fell upon his features, rendering them ghastly and distorted, but it needed no second glance to assure me that the corpse was that of the mysterious Ethiopian "minstrel" who had so inexplicably greeted me as "Uncle Sam" in the Empire promenade on boat-race night.

III

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Little more remains to be told.

I changed cars seventeen times between London and the coast. The loss of time was considerable, but it whiled away the monotony of the journey, and as a precaution, together with the badness of the road, it was effectual in throwing our pursuers off the track. Their overturned car was found the next morning in a lime quarry below the road near Dorsham. Beneath it was the body of the Greek curio-dealer with the Scotch accent who had sold me the cinque-cento dagger with the phial of cholera microbes concealed in the handle. By his side lay the form of the old-looking young gallery first-nighter. Even to this day my frontal bone carries the scar of his well-aimed opera-glasses, on that occasion when, in the stalls of the Hilaric during the Royal performance, nothing but Sybil's presence of mind in flinging open her umbrella had saved me from a fatal blow. Both were crushed almost beyond recognition.

Dawn was within an hour of breaking when my seventeenth car—a taxi-cab of obsolete pattern—broke down in the quaint old High Street of Plyhampton. Leaving it to its fate I went on alone to make inquiries, and soon learned, to my delight, that the superdreadnought *Stalactite,* the flag-ship of the Admiral, was lying

at that moment moored to the end of the pier. Truly fate, which had played us many sorry tricks in the past, was on our side that night.

Despite the earliness of the hour, the Admiral, Sir Slocombe Colqumondeley, received me at once in his state-room, a magnificent apartment upholstered in green and gold. As his eyes rested on the superscription of the packet I handed him he could not repress a slight start, but before he had finished the reading of the message his face had grown strangely tense. For a few minutes he paced the salon in deep thought, then turning to an instrument he transmitted a series of commands in quick succession. I have since learned, though I little suspected it at the time, that the tenor of these orders was for every ship of the fleet to clear for action.

Shaking off his preoccupation Sir Slocombe turned to me with an engaging smile.

"So you are my daughter Sybil's young man, Dr. Humdrum?" he exclaimed, with bluff sailor-like heartiness. "Well, well; we must see what we can arrange after this business is over. How would Surgeon-Major of the Fleet suit you; eh, what?"

A few minutes later I was leaving the pier, more bewildered by the turn events had taken than I would care to admit, when a tall, dignified officer, with grey mutton-chop side-whiskers, approached me.

"Pardon me, but did you enter Plyhampton in a taxi-cab numbered XYZ 999?" he inquired courteously.

"I did," I replied, referring to the details which I had taken the precaution to jot down on my cuff.

"Then it is my duty, as Warden of the Port, to put you in irons," and he beckoned to a master of marines.

"On what charge?" I demanded with some hauteur.

"The driver of the taxi has been found stabbed to death with his own speed lever," he explained gravely.

"Inside the vehicle was the dead body of the notorious international spy known to the secret police as 'Mr. A.' He was disguised as an elderly Chinese seaman, and was wearing, beneath his tunic, a forged Order of the Crimson Hat of Siam."

"Is it possible?" I gasped.

"Well, frankly, it doesn't sound it," he admitted with unofficial candour; "but that isn't my affair."

"I am Dr. Humdrum," I said, producing my stethoscope, "and I live at 305A Hammersmith Road, Kensington. Surely——"

"That is quite satisfactory," he replied, throwing the handcuffs into a lee scupper that stood open. "Accept my apology. Hold an inquest on the bodies as soon as you conveniently can and you have my assurance that you will hear nothing further of this unpleasant business."

. . . . . .

We are seated in the Piazzo d'Esperanto at Mentone. Sybil's head is nestling on my shoulder.

"Had we better not explain to them now, darling, exactly what it was all about?" I venture to suggest.

"No, dearest; I don't think we better had," replies Sybil, watching the play of the deep blue against the distant haze.

Maidencombe, 1912.

VIII

Fate and a Family Council

"WHERE for?" asked the guard. "Nymph Aurelia," I replied. "Change at Great Wivelton," he commented. The door was banged, the whistle sounded, and the important-looking train drew slowly along the platform.

All that I knew about Nymph Aurelia could have been written on the back of a postage stamp. Five years previously I was living at Woollambo just clearing expenses. I should perhaps explain that Woollambo is a rather out-of-the-way spot in the Mount Valkyria district of Western Australia. I was prospecting one day when a scrap of paper, blown from heaven knows where, came skimming along the ground. I secured it and found that it was a page from an English railway guide; all that the sun and rain had left on it were the words, "Nymph Aurelia (347). See trains to Great Wivelton and thence twice daily."

Your gold-seeker is necessarily something of a gambler, and therefore, I take it, more or less a creature of superstition. Probably I did not expect anything, but I released the paper again, pegged the exact direction it took, and then made 347 paces down the line. That incident marked the discovery of the celebrated Golden Nymph mine.

You will understand now why I was making a pilgrimage, as it were, to Nymph Aurelia. I was curious and not ungrateful. When I had seen the place I would

present it with a free library, a breakwater, a clock-tower, a motor fire-engine, or anything of that kind that constituted its most pressing want, provided that the thing could be done anonymously and without any fuss.

At least that had been my intention when I took a ticket at Waterloo. But as the train began to find its way round the undulating Surrey commons, to cross deep shady lanes, and to explore pine woods that had seemed in the distance to be designed for the Noah's Ark of some giant's nursery, it suddenly came upon me that here was the England which I had come nine thousand miles to see. London, where I had been waited on by a Swiss, valeted by a Frenchman, served at the bank by a German, and sung to on the patriotic subject of Motherland by an Italian, had not, to be frank, struck me as being quite homelike. Nymph Aurelia, for all I knew, might be equally disappointing; but I felt strangely drawn to the quiet sunlit country through which I was being carried.

According to the time-table the first stop was yet fifty miles away, but the charm and friendliness of the woodland grew irresistible. A notice in the carriage informed me, as I hastily assumed, that I could stop the train in return for the payment of a fine of five pounds. I understood that it was a business offer, but this I have since learned was not so. However, that is by the way. I pulled the cord, took down my light portmanteau from the rack, got five sovereigns in readiness and waited.

Had the train stopped where I wished and where I think it ought to have done, I should have stepped directly from the line into the depths of a fern-carpeted dell. As a matter of fact, however, it drew up along the more commonplace platform of a country station. An official of some kind came forward as I alighted. As I wished him a cheerful good-afternoon and dropped the

five coins into his hesitating palm I could not fail to observe that the proceeding struck him as exceptional in some way. But he remained speechless, and with a brisk step I passed over the bridge that spanned the line.

A large private motor-car was waiting in the otherwise deserted station-yard, the driver in his place, and, as a casual glance showed me, someone seated inside. I was passing, giving it no further attention, when my own name, called out by the occupant of the car, pulled me up.

"Hullo, Staples, here we are," was the greeting. "How the deuce did you come down?"

Now, as I have indicated, this was my name—Frank Staples. But the extraordinary thing was that I did not know a soul in England, while the man in the motor-car seemed to have been positively expecting me.

I approached the door to investigate when I became aware of the presence of a second occupant.

For years I had had in my mind a fairly well-defined portrait of a woman's face. The features were small and regular, the poise of the head imperious, the expression wayward and piquant, and the whole set with a dark and brilliant beauty. I scarcely expected ever to see in the flesh this image that had unconsciously formed itself; nor did I until I stood at the door of the motor-car confronted by a girl whose vivid face was sufficiently like my ideal to startle me into an astonished silence.

"Your train isn't due for ten minutes yet," continued the man. "How did the express come to stop?"

"I stopped it," I replied mechanically, without taking my eyes off the extraordinarily vivacious face before me. "I wanted to get out here."

"The deuce you did!" he exclaimed, forcing himself on me through my preoccupation by the vigour of his personality. "Do you mean to say you pulled the cord?"

It was scarcely necessary to reply. The platform at the other side of the station was beginning to hum with official activity. A porter appeared on the bridge running and gesticulating as he ran. To me the excitement I had raised seemed ridiculously out of proportion, but the man in the car took in the situation with a single glance.

"Jump in, you scamp," he commanded. "I'm not going to pay for another of your pranks."

"If Frank is going to ride," exclaimed the lady with sudden decision, "I am going to walk."

"Then why the Harry did you come to meet him?" demanded my new old friend with considerable warmth.

"It was necessary for me to see him before I could make up my mind," she replied with dignity. "Now I have seen him."

This did not put me on any better terms with the situation.

"You had better let me explain," I began.

"Hilda, don't be an idiot. Frank, don't be an ass. John, home." All these injunctions operating simultaneously, I found myself sitting down violently opposite the lady as the car leapt forward.

So far I had been an entirely innocent impostor, if an impostor at all. A man can have no better excuse for his presence, I take it, than to be greeted familiarly by name and pressed into the company. I was Frank Staples, securely conscious of my identity, and the mistake, whatever it was, rested with them; but at this point, influenced, need I confess? by the scornful beauty's presence, and by my increasing desire to make her further acquaintance, I entered upon a course of active dissimulation.

We were scarcely clear of the yard when a thought seemed to strike my friend with sharp surprise.

"Where is Boosey, by the way?" he said, leaning across to me.

I accepted the inauspicious omen of the gentleman's name as my only clue.

"Probably drunk by this time," I replied with an indifferent shrug.

He stared hard at me for a moment and then nodded once or twice, almost sympathetically it seemed.

"You are prepared to go on without him?" he asked.

"Up to a certain point," I replied guardedly.

"Then I know your line as well as you do yourself," he announced triumphantly.

"That's extremely likely," I admitted, and we relapsed into silence again.

At the distance of about two miles from the station the car turned off from the road, passing through a pair of fine old wrought-iron gates into private grounds of some pretensions. Another minute brought us to the house, a substantial white mansion, to my eyes about a couple of centuries old. Here everything was in readiness for the occasion, whatever it might be, and without any explanation or introduction we all crossed the hall and entered a spacious room which proved to be the library.

I had recognised the unlikelihood of being able to keep up the deception very long, but the moment I passed inside the room I saw exposure lurking ahead in every word. The extent of my ambition was to effect a dignified capitulation; to be allowed to pass out—or, better still, to stay in—with the honours of war. Seated about the room were nearly a score of people, and from their manner and attitude I at once understood that they were assembled for some specific purpose and had been awaiting our arrival. For the most part they were men of mature age, but among them were two or three ladies

and one quite venerable couple. I passed round the room, taking my cue from the greetings I received. With most I shook hands; here and there a bow sufficed. The aged dame startled me by kissing me affectionately upon the cheek, but I gathered that on the whole I was not popular.

"Five years in America seems scarcely to have changed you, young man," remarked a smug-looking individual with a significance that at once put him among the unfriendlies.

"Not in the least," I replied cheerfully; and as I had evidently been in need of change my callousness was established.

These courtesies took up very little time. A general movement on the part of the men was made towards the table. Under someone's indication I took one end, while a legal-looking gentleman fronted by a deed-box and writing material occupied the other. The ladies and the grandparental couple remained outside the conclave.

I thought that matters had gone as far as I could decently let them.

"Before you begin," I said, "I have to make a personal explanation. My presence here——"

"A moment, Mr. Staples," interposed the leader of the hostile section. "Is he entitled"—turning to the legal headpiece—"is he entitled to make a personal statement that may possibly prejudice the opinions—or the views—of others?"

"It is a debatable point," replied the authority, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "I think that on the whole, Mr. Staples, we had perhaps better stick to the exact letter of the conditions."

"Oh, all right," I said. "Only remember that I made the offer."

"If Frank has anything in the nature of a claim re-

garding his immediate position to advance," put in a friendly, "I think that in view of his isolated situation it ought to be considered."

That gave me a wild idea. The beautiful creature for whose sake I was more or less making a conspicuous ass of myself and courting much obloquy had selected a chair exactly behind me, to my continued discomfiture.

"Yes, I have," I declared recklessly. "I claim to have Hilda sitting next to me during the proceedings." She would be furious, of course, but she was that already, and I had a lively anticipation that she would be even more so shortly.

Very much to my surprise, no one seemed to regard this outrageous demand as anything exceptional. There was some laughter, and even a little applause from the friendlies. Another chair was brought up and the disdainful young lady was persuaded to occupy a place by my side. She said nothing, but her expressive eyes left me in no doubt as to the nature of her feelings.

The lawyer-man rose to address us and we seemed to be getting to the root of the mystery at last. "To-day being the 20th of August, 1910," he began, we are met here according to arrangement to fulfil the conditions of the rather remarkable agreement entered into by the late Henry Montgomery Staples and the late Frederick Basset. As that agreement with its many contingent clauses is a lengthy and elaborate document, and as you are all perfectly well acquainted with its essential features, I propose to take it as read, merely remarking that, in spite of the doubt thrown upon its validity from interested quarters"—here most of the unfriendlies wagged their heads weightily—"we have the highest authority for believing it to be a perfectly legal instrument.

"I beg to differ, Mr. Frobisher," rapped out a prominent unfriendly.

"I shall at once proceed to lodge a caveat," announced another defiantly.

"I put in a formal protest," declared a third.

"Quite so, gentlemen; I note your objections," continued the lawyer imperturbably. "Now, Mr. Frank," taking up a paper which appeared to contain half-a-dozen paragraphs, "are you prepared to adopt by deed poll the name of Basset?"

"Certainly not," I replied. "I don't see why on earth I should adopt the name of Basset. There is nothing particularly attractive about it. My own is quite——"

"There is no need for you to disparage my name, Frank," exclaimed the girl indignantly. "It is one to which you have been materially indebted in the past."

That was the worst of my position. On the others also my reply had a remarkable effect. For some reason every friendly at once became hostile and every unfriendly adopted a sympathetic attitude. Numerically I gained, but I preferred the old allies.

"As Mr. Staples repudiates that condition——" struck in an ex-unfriendly.

"We will nevertheless go on," replied the lawyer grimly. "Will you, Mr. Staples, in the event of your benefiting, continue the Basset claim to the Thorneywood estate?"

A great deal seemed to hang on that, by the breathless interest with which my reply was awaited. I had to answer one way or the other. I took what seemed to be the simplest course.

"No, I won't," I replied. And to cut discussion short I added, "I decline to state my reasons."

Despair and satisfaction again swept over the contending forces, but which lot I had pleased and which

offended I cannot say. A ferocious little man, whispering across the table to me in tones of suppressed passion, took all my attention.

"You decline to give you reasons, Frank Staples, but I can see through them well enough," he declared. "You think you will be able to make it right with the Coppinghams, buy out the Priory mortgagee, and at the same time conciliate Aunt Harriet. Let me tell you, sir, you are playing a dangerous game!"

"I quite feel that," I admitted.

"For supposing the Brandon boundary decision *is* reversed, where will you be then?"

"That's the weak spot," I agreed. "Where, indeed? What would you advise?"

"You can hardly expect *me* to advise *you* at this point," he replied, becoming more amiable, "but mark this: you will bitterly repent putting any reliance on your Uncle Tapping's promises. I can see that he is behind you in this, but he is only using you for his own ends. You will soon find out that he isn't what you think he is."

"No, no," I replied. "I can't believe that. I am sure old Uncle Tapping is all right. He is much more likely to find out soon that I am not what he thinks I am."

Mr. Frobisher's formal voice broke off this agreeable conversation.

"I now have to put a crucial question to you, Mr. Staples," he was saying. And then it came: "Do you agree to marry Hilda Basset?"

I suppose that I might have been prepared for the ridiculous family agreement leading up to something of this sort, but, as a matter of fact, I couldn't have been more completely taken by surprise. In my indignation I clean forgot that I was merely an involuntary proxy.

I was also conscious of going as red as a lobster and as wild as a scalded cat.

"What the blazes do you mean by asking such a question?" I demanded hotly. "You don't suppose that I am ass enough to imagine that Miss Basset would marry *me*, do you? If you really want to know, from the first moment I saw——"

The remarkable effect of my outburst saved me from saying any more. Hitherto my replies had gained me one party at the expense of alienating the other. This time I simply succeeded in sheerly astonishing everyone into speechless, breathless bewilderment. I don't think I ever witnessed a more curious spectacle than that of some eighteen dumb, open-mouthed, petrified people. How they would have come round naturally I don't know, but Hilda broke the spell. She, with the rest, had been staring point-blank into my face. What she saw there, or what she missed there, I have yet to learn, but suddenly she sat back in her chair and went off into peal after peal of uncontrollable laughter. This was the moment chosen by a family retainer to open the door, step two paces into the room, and solemnly announce:

"Mr. Frank Staples; Mr. Boosey."

Hilda—it is scarcely worth while beginning to call her Miss Basset now—has since declared that the resemblance between the two Frank Stapleses is superficial and illusory. Nevertheless it was enough to make the eighteen friendlies and unfriendlies—who were having a day of shocks—look from one to the other of us in amazement, while they opened and closed their mouths in silent unison.

For the third time that eventful day I offered to make an explanation, and on this occasion no one objected. They hung on to my every word indeed.

"This is certainly very remarkable," said the man

who had brought me in the car. "Very remarkable, indeed, but, given one coincidence, not altogether incredible. The question is: Who are *you?* Who *are* you?"

"I am Frank Armitage Staples, of course," I replied.

"Yes, yes," he said irritably; "no one is going to doubt that, with your features. But what Frank Staples? That's the point."

"So far as I am concerned," I replied modestly, "I have always been accustomed in Woollambo to regard myself as *the* Frank Staples."

I saw a questioning glance pass from face to face among some who sat at the table.

"Would you inform us as to your father's name?" asked one politely.

"It was Frank Rupert Staples. He is dead."

"And his father?"

"He possessed the more unusual name of Cedric Oliver."

"Cedric Oliver Staples," slowly and deliberately pronounced the patriarch from the armchair. "Tried at Guildford in the spring of 1826 on a charge of forgery. Found guilty and sentenced to transportation for life. He was my uncle."

"Possibly, sir," I remarked, turning round to face him, "but, so far as I am aware, he never claimed the kinship, nor referred to any of his relations. And in Australia it is not considered etiquette to inquire into the family history of those who come of the early settler stock."

"Look here, this is all very jolly and convivial," put in the other Frank restlessly, "but old Boosey says he must get back by the 5.30, and I'm not keen on staying myself. Frosty sort of welcome it seems to me offhand. Not even a milk-cart to be had at the station, and some

silly ass had stopped the express, so they say, and held up our train for ten minutes."

"But you can't run away like that," expostulated the master of the house. "There is the agreement——"

"Oh, don't you worry about that, Toppy, old man," said my namesake in the easiest manner. "I have put in a formal appearance and Boosey will look into the thing and see if there is anything coming to me out of the wreck. I'm afraid it will be rather a back-hander for you, Hilda, but I'm out of the running for the double now."

"You don't mean to say——?" exclaimed all the friendlies, who had begun to pick up hope again.

"Yes, married already," admitted the gentleman complacently. "Met the lady in Brooklyn three months ago. She is what you might call flossy—distinctly flossy. She can put her heels against a chalked line on the stage, and without moving bend back till she picks up a nickel with her teeth. You shouldn't always have been so jolly stiff, Hilda, you know."

"I am delighted that you have found a lady who seems to be quite the reverse," replied Hilda pleasantly.

Thus had fate, in the shape of Nymph Aurelia again, been pulling benevolently at the reins of my destiny.

"For a practical young man, brought up in a new country, you seem to be strangely fanciful," remarked Hilda a week later, when I told her about these things.

"It is true," I admitted. "I am always having visions, seeing fairies, hearing voices, and touching posts. From the first moment I saw you——"

The instant I said the words we both remembered the occasion when they were last spoken. Hilda turned away with rising colour. I was struck by a sudden fear that I had spoiled the thing.

"I knew that we should be friends," I concluded lamely.

I caught a glimpse of her face, and across it there swept a look that reminded me then of the sun leaving a landscape.

"What I just said is utterly false, Hilda, only I was so horribly afraid," I said facing her. "I have never even thought of you in friendship. From the first moment I saw you I knew that, whoever you were, you were the woman who had been growing in my heart ever since my world began."

The sunshine returned radiantly. That is how we come to be spending our honeymoon at Nymph Aurelia.

Ravenscourt Park, 1909.

IX

Lucretia and the Horse-Doctor

"NO 4.32 train!" I exclaimed. "Oh, confound the thing! Are you sure?"

If I had not been rather irritated at finding that I had walked two miles in twenty-three minutes along an abnormally dusty road in order to catch a non-existent train on a toy-gauge railway I should certainly have seen the impropriety of putting such a question to the station-master. But the station-master at Lower Roffey was not in the least disposed to be offended. I do not think I ever met a railwayman within three grades of his rank who was less inclined to stand on his dignity. He issued and collected tickets, looked after the passengers' luggage, when they had any—and it was by no means the exception, I gathered, for there to be no passengers even—worked the home signals, cleaned and trimmed the oil lamps, saw to the flower-beds, and in addition to doing, in fact, all the general work of the station, delivered the local weekly paper, acted as agent for an American fountain pen, kept poultry and sold ginger-beer.

"It's right," he replied sympathetically. "The 4.32 is a summer train and doesn't run after the end of September: 6.18 is the next now."

"At all events," I retorted, "the 4.32 is down in the time-table that I bought at a shop up in the village, less than an hour ago. It's a pretty nuisance."

The station-master nodded in complete agreement.

"Lukie Marsh ought to have known better," he remarked. "I took the new time-tables there last week myself. It was Lukie that served you, of course; not her sister Jane?"

Still smarting under the discomfort of my unnecessary exertion, I intimated that I was, unhappily, a stranger to the personalities of both Lukie and her sister Jane.

"That is so, of course," assented the station-master cheerfully. "Still, you may take it from me that it would be Lukie. Jane would have had more sense. Not but what Lukie has her wits about her in general, but ever since she consulted that horse-doctor that came to Crossgate last autumn she has been absent-minded at times."

"I suppose consulting a horse-doctor was the first symptom of it?" I suggested with covert sarcasm.

"No; it wasn't that. He wasn't really a horse-doctor either, you must understand. That was only what old Doctor Page over at Crossgate called him.

" 'The man has the methods and the knowledge of a common horse-doctor,' he said in a rage whenever the subject came up; 'and those who go to see him are asses.'

"Of course that was because he was nettled at the business the other was doing. However, the word got about and no one used it oftener than Hankins—that was the fellow's name—himself.

" 'I'm not a doctor,' he said every night at the beginning of his talk; 'I'm Hankins the Medicine Man, known also in every important town in Great Britain and Ireland as Hankins the Make-You-Well. In Crossgate, however, I am called the Horse-Doctor. Now, my friends, would you rather be made well by a horse-doctor or kept ill by Doctor Donkey?'

"That was all he said about it; nothing personal, you

see, but it went down wonderfully well among the chaps who stood round.

"I must say he went to work in what seemed to me a more reasonable way than Doctor Page did. Page, who was generally ill with gout or asthma himself, tried to make out to you that you were pretty well all right when you went to see him and discouraged you from going on. Hankins claimed to be the only sound man in Crossgate, and offered to prove scientifically that everyone else had something wrong and getting worse inside him and sapping his vitality, even though he might know nothing of it. Every night he gave a lecture in the market-place opposite the Goat and people came miles to hear him. He had a platform and life-sized pictures of your body in colour with the different inward parts to flap backwards and forwards on hinges, so that he seemed to take you in on one side of yourself and bring you out on the other, telling you all about the various diseases, unbeknown to ordinary professional doctors, that you met with on the way. Then he went through the symptoms of different fatal ailments and showed you what you looked like inside when you'd got them. Before he'd done, pretty nearly everyone felt that they had most of the things he described and he did a first-rate business in remedies. Whether it was his medicines—as he claimed—or not I don't know, but he certainly had a wonderful frame. He'd stand on his platform and bellow like a bull for five minutes at a time to show what really healthy lungs were like. I've heard him from this station, three miles away, on a still evening. I've seen him jump off his platform and leap over it twelve or fifteen times backwards and forwards without stopping for breath.

" 'There's a heart toughened with Hankins's Vital Elixir,' he'd say. 'I was a puny thriftless wisp of a boy,

and look at me now. There isn't a man, woman or child over the age of fourteen standing round who couldn't do the same at this moment if his or her heart was properly nourished."

"If you went up to the platform then, he'd tell you what was the matter with you for nothing, charging only for the medicine; but during the day he had a room at Whittle's, the barber, where it was a shilling for consultations. That was how Lukie Marsh came to see him."

We hardly seemed to have reached the point of the story yet, but the station-master gave me the distinct impression of trying to make me believe that this was all.

"The fact is," he apologised as he met my inquiring eye, "I have only just remembered that Lukie was dead set against it getting about. I suppose the only two people who knew all the ins and outs of it besides Lukie were her sister Jane and myself. I'm a sort of half-cousin of theirs. Then I send paragraphs of anything of interest that happens here up to the local paper, and as a police case came out of this, Lukie was anxious to know what was going to be printed about it and told me everything."

"Nothing of discredit to the lady, I am sure," I remarked encouragingly.

"You're right," he agreed warmly. "It was an experience that many people would boast of, and now that it's a year ago and Lukie's banns are up, I don't suppose that she'd mind a stranger knowing."

"Perhaps you'll have a bottle of ginger-beer with me?" I suggested.

"Thanks, I don't mind if I do," said the station-master. "It's middling dry talking in this weather."

He produced the various articles from the booking-

office, opened the bottles and filled the glasses with the most businesslike expertness and then continued the narrative of Miss Marsh's remarkable experience.

"The thing Lukie was most afraid of was that it might make trouble with William Hill's people if they heard that she had been to consult the horse-doctor. The Hills, especially William's mother, were strict herbalists and regarded all other forms of medicine as sinful and poisonous. Lukie and William had been more or less engaged for seventeen years, and, as she said to me, she could not afford at her age to throw all that time away and begin again.

"Doubtless it would have been better if she had thought of that at the beginning and not gone, but she was always one for gaiety and things had been pretty quiet at Roffey last year. It was wet for the Flower Show and the black missionary man who was to lecture on 'Savage Africa' couldn't find the place and never came. Everyone was talking about this Hankins; so one day Lukie persuaded Jane to go with her to Crossgate, picking a time when the fewest people who might know her were likely to be about.

"Of course she didn't go for mere curiosity. For some time back she'd had a notion that something that oughtn't to be there was growing somewhere down her throat. She couldn't see it, and couldn't feel it, and it didn't exactly hurt, but the idea worried her whenever she remembered it. As she said, it might be only fancy, but it was a good opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.

"Jane stayed outside in the market-place because from what she'd heard she thought that the sight of Hankins's life-sized pictures would make her feel queer; and besides they weren't quite sure but what he would charge double if both of them went in.

"Hankins listened to what Lukie had to say and then tried most of his machines on her. Finally he strapped a round looking-glass on to his forehead, stood her by the window, and shot the sunlight into her throat.

" 'I don't see any growth so far,' he said, when he had done all that he could with that, 'but as you think that there is something, there most likely is, because there can't be an effect without a cause, and it is contrary to nature to think of anything that doesn't exist. Fortunately I have with me a means of testing even further.' With that he got out a little electric light, no bigger than a plum-stone hardly, that was worked by a pocket battery. 'Now,' he said, 'I am going to press your tongue down with a spoon-handle, throw the light well into the pharynx, and then we shall see as far as there is anything to be seen.'

"Lukie thought half a minute and then made a move towards the door.

" 'I should not think of allowing it,' she said.

"That took back the horse-doctor considerably. 'It won't hurt you the least bit,' he said.

" 'I am not afraid of that. And I daresay that the town ladies you are accustomed to, do not mind being seen in the way you speak of, but in the country we are more particular. Good-afternoon.'

" 'Hold hard a minute,' said Hankins, who was well-meaning enough; 'perhaps I didn't pick my words quite as I might. Haven't you any discreet lady friend whom you could have here with you?"

" 'There's my sister Jane waiting out in the pig-market. She's older than me and sees mostly to the shop, but I couldn't say whether she's discreet or not,' replied Lukie.

" 'Jane will do A1,' said Hankins. 'Call her up.'

"They got Jane up and Lukie allowed him to get to

work again. But it seemed as though something was bound to go wrong at every turn. Just when he had fixed his light in position Lukie screwed up her face and began to wave her hands frantically. The light had tickled her nose and she felt that she was going to sneeze whatever happened. Hankins, not in the least guessing what she meant, simply stood and stared at her. Then Lukie shut her mouth with a snap, sneezed, gave a gulp, turned pale, and said, 'What was that?'

"Hankins pulled up the ends of his wires. 'My Sunday hat!' he exclaimed, 'the blamed thing has come unhitched. You've swallowed the bulb, Miss.' So she had.

"How he satisfied them I don't fully know, but it was more than an hour before they were composed enough to go home. Whatever he thought, Hankins made out that there was no danger, and he added, handsomely enough as it seemed certain that Lukie had bitten through the wire, that he had no intention of charging for the lamp.

" 'It's no use looking on the dark side of things,' said Lukie when they got back; so she made a hearty meal off tinned salmon, to which she was very partial, and then, feeling pretty tired what with one thing and another, went early to bed.

"That night Moses Andrews, a sort of low-down thief from the lime-quarries over at Shapley, broke into the house, thinking to make a good haul. The Marshes were supposed to have some money put away; and the place being old and ramshackle it wasn't difficult even for Mo to get in, though for that matter he was really more fitted to be a tramp than a burglar. He went through the till in the shop and all the drawers in the lower part of the house without finding much, and then he made his way upstairs. His idea was to wake one of the sisters quietly, hold a hatchet over her head, and frighten her into tell-

ing him where the money was hid. As it happened he chanced on Lukie's room.

"When Lukie woke and opened her eyes to see a man in a black mask standing over her with the wood-chopper she didn't wait to hear what he had to say. She opened her mouth, and the next minute there would have been a screech that would have woke all Roffey if she had got it out. But the instant she opened her mouth there was no need for Lukie to yell: it was Mo Andrews who did that, and dropping his sack and tools he lit out in a bee-line for home, the worst scared burglar that ever picked a lock. He went through the bedroom window without stopping to think of opening it, and dropping on to a moderately soft bed of cabbages he tore down the garden, howling manfully as he went.

"I don't understand much about electricity myself, but it's tolerably clear now what had happened. Hankins's little bulb had got wedged up somewhere out of harm's way, and the vinegar and other things that Lukie had eaten acted as a sort of acid and started it working at full pressure. Lukie herself got an idea that the light was accumulating inwardly as long as she was asleep, and that when she opened her mouth it leapt out like a gas explosion, but I put that down to a woman's fancy. However it may be, there is no doubt that coming suddenly in the dark the sight would have a goodish effect on a mean-spirited sort of creature like that.

"As for Andrews, he was only beginning his adventures. Half-way down the garden was a clump of bush fruit trees, gooseberries and logans and so on. Being troubled with sparrows and finches, Jane had bought a length of tarred netting early in the season and stretched it over all the trees to save the fruit. Into the middle of this net shot Andrews with enough move on him to carry clean through an ordinary hedge. A man armed

with a double-barrelled duck-gun couldn't have stopped him at that moment, but the net did. It held good and firm and the more he plunged and reared the more he wrapped himself up in it. What he did with his ramping was to pull up a gooseberry bush that was in the net behind him and to jerk it forward so that it sprang on to his shoulders and lapped its branches round his neck. Then everything that he'd ever heard as a boy about the Devil and Hell and the 'net spread to catch sinners' came back to him—and owing to his parents having been Particular Revivalists and regular at chapel, it ran mostly on fire and brimstone and claws and such-like.

"'He's got me!' they heard him wail in a despairing sort of way, and then he seems to have fainted dead off.

"By this time a good many people were beginning to come round. Jane hearing an uproar ran into Lukie's room with a light. Lukie was sitting up in bed and apparently on the point of going off into hysterics. Jane, whose remedies were simple but practical, seized her by the arm and thumped her several times soundly on the back. Lukie coughed twice, put her hand up to her mouth, and produced Hankins's lamp, none the worse for its travels. That ended her chief trouble.

"Misgivings about what Mo Andrews might say when he was brought up began to worry her a little when she thought of it the next day. Being a sensitive woman, besides the disagreeableness with William Hill's people she disliked the idea of the low jokes that would be sure to be made about having electric lights and such matters. As it happened, she had nothing to fear. It took three men upwards of half-an-hour with scissors and pocket-knives to get Mo clear of the net and he came out of it a changed man. By the time he appeared before the Court he had got religion solid.

"'Well, Andrews,' said the magistrate, who had seen

him there before. 'What have you to say in answer to the charge?'

" 'Nothing,' replied Mo calmly. 'All that business is past and done with. I stand here a sinner, but on the solid rock at last. Can you say the same, friend? Is all well with you?'

" 'Remanded for the state of the prisoner's mind to be inquired into,' said the magistrate; and that was the last that Lukie had to do with it."

West Kensington, 1909.

X

The War Hawks

I

"THAT is the position," said the War Minister, folding the sheets of paper from which he had been reading.

No one spoke for a few moments. "The position" related to the movements of the various fleets, to the strength and disposal of the available troops and kindred details; the place was an historic apartment in Downing Street, and the dozen men assembled were engaged that afternoon in regulating the destiny of the Empire, and, incidentally, that of the world.

Hallet, the Home Secretary, broke the silence, which had reached a painful intensity.

"I take the responsibility of proposing that we recognise the inevitable to-day rather than to-morrow, and signify our acceptance of the terms of the ultimatum," he said, with slow deliberation.

"I differ," cried the aged Earl of Trentford sharply. "We cannot be so desperately placed as Mollineux leads us to believe. It—it is so sudden, so unexpected. A great nation cannot be vanquished and annihilated in a single day. There must be something we have overlooked. If we are being invaded by air, where are the dirigibles? We have heard no word of them."

There was a low ruption of laughter, sardonic and

half-heartbroken, from two or three men. The War Minister dispassionately picked out a sheet in cypher from the litter of paper before him.

"In response to the War Office inquiry of this morning, the officer in charge of the section wires from Aldershot: 'Dirigibles Nos. 3 and 4 temporarily useless as a result of the malicious damage effected on the night of the 11th inst., as already reported. Nos. 6 and 7 still under construction; delayed beyond anticipated date owing to 6-inch counterbalance carrier shafts having been made and delivered instead of 7-inch as ordered. No. 5 available——' "

"The vessel popularly known as *Quo Vadis the Vth?*" inquired a colleague smoothly.

"I have no knowledge of the name," replied the War Minister, with unruffled composure. " 'No. 5 available, but during the continuance of S.E. gale registered as fifty-two miles by the anemometer, and reported by the South Foreland station as prevalent for the next forty-eight hours, impossible even to meet enemy's air-fleet from this point. Have been requested to allow transport of No. 5 by motor-wagons to Maidstone, and after the passage of enemy's fleet to make ascent by night on the chance of involving at least one of the enemy in mutual destruction.' "

There were a few cries of "Hear, hear!" from the least depressed members of the Cabinet. Sir William Mollineux raised a hand deprecatingly.

"We all recognise the devotion of such an offer," he said quietly, "but unless we are prepared with a definite and continuous plan of resistance, it would be not only useless, but nationally suicidal."

"And the War Office has no plan to put before us?" demanded the earl.

"In the exceptional circumstances, none."

"Then I have," retorted Trentford, with a touch of senile stubbornness. "I propose that the seat of government be transferred to Oxford; that Gurney shall be instructed to join fleets with Colenso and force the passage of the Elbe, while France fulfils her obligations by demonstrating along the frontier, and——"

Sir William Mollineux glanced down the table and nodded to a colleague.

"My lord," interposed the man who had been singled out, "we have received the most explicit warning that while this incredible fleet of Krupp-Parsevals is in being, France will be unable to make any move."

Trentford stared blankly at the speaker. "In the face of the most definite——"

"Mastery of the air overrides all treaties," commented another.

"It is no use, Trentford," said the Premier, gathering the decision of the Council at a glance. "All the navies and all the armies in the world are not worth one Krupplin in the light of our present information. Let us dismiss armies and navies from our calculations. There are only two classes of Powers to-day: Germany, and the rest of the world."

"And if we accept the terms forced on us, and abandon all hope of building a rival air-fleet, there can never be anything else."

"Until a new force comes into being," replied the Premier, with a sudden gleam of kindling enthusiasm "What form it will take we cannot guess, and perhaps we shall never know; but in the future I can confidently foresee some undreamt-of bending of the forces of nature to the use of man's ingenuity by which the Krupplins of that time will be as impotent as the *Dreadnoughts* of to-day, and the nation that relies on their pre-eminence to usurp the sovereignty of the world will be trapped and

humbled in its false security as we are trapped in ours."

"I hope that you are right," said one; "and I hope that our authorities in that day will have sufficient humour to mask their operations under a frantic construction of Krupplins."

Some smiled sadly, and all caught the bitter jest, remembering how, a few years previously, Germany had masked her strength, gained all the time she wanted, and duped the suspicion and the activity of England by a kindred subterfuge.

"We may be powerless to repel the—the so-called Krupplins if what we hear of their capabilities is correct (an assumption which I venture to doubt very strongly, or surely some indication of their menace would have reached us before this), but what beyond that?" demanded the earl, returning to the point with dull tenacity. "They could not drop explosives from balloons, navigable or otherwise—they would not dare. There is still such a thing as International Law, gentlemen."

"My lord, my lord," exclaimed Hallet, bringing his hand down upon the table with such a passion of pent-up feeling that the jewel sprang from the ring he wore and rolled unheeded to the floor, "do not deceive yourself. There is International Law—but there are no nations to enforce it."

"Besides," suggested another, "what is there to prevent them from using short-range howitzers of some new pattern? They could open the breeches of their guns and simply roll the shells out of the muzzles, I suppose. No, no, earl, there is nothing in that, I am afraid."

"You are all against me?" said Trentford, looking round doggedly.

"We dare not do otherwise, my old friend," said his chief sadly. "The lives of seven million people are in our hands here in London alone, and if we resort to arms

the City will be a smoking ruin at the end of forty-eight hours."

Trentford rose to his feet with the arresting dignity of age and isolation.

"I am an old man," he began deliberately, "and whatever course you adopt will cease to affect me before very long. I have seen my country involved in three great struggles and in minor wars innumerable. In every case there were not wanting those who prophesied disasters and defeat; in every case there were reverses and serious losses; and in every case there was an ultimate victory which left England stronger than before. It has remained for a Cabinet of which I am a member to receive invasion with bended knee and to ransom their capital without striking a single blow. I am too old to learn the new way, gentlemen. I will go into my own country, where I was formerly honorary colonel of yeomanry, and if I can find a score of men who would rather be shot as Germany's foes than live as Germany's vassals, by God, I will lead them!"

Right on his words came a dramatic interruption. The sound of some confusion on the other side of the door had marked the last sentence of the tirade. One or two Ministers had looked inquiringly at the Premier; his hand was already on the bell, when the sharp report of a pistol strung them all to an acuter tension. In the moment of startled indecision the door was opened, a man stepped quickly into the room, closed the door again and stood with his back against it, while he surveyed the assembly with keen alertness, still holding the smoking revolver in his hand.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" demanded the Premier, between wrath and apprehension.

"The meaning of the outrage, sir, is that you apparently gave your door-keeper instructions to admit no

one on any pretext, while my inflexible determination was to go to any length in order to reach you."

"You have shot Taylor!"

"What of that?" demanded the intruder coolly. "Do you know what is happening beyond your cordon of police? There are ten thousand men in Whitehall, and the most popular suggestion is that they should hang the Secretary of State for War and your illustrious self on the nearest lamp-post. In the City and beyond, the authorities are unable to make the least show of keeping order, and looting and violence are in progress on every side. There is a panic-swept exodus from London by all the high-roads to the north and west, and since five o'clock this morning more than two hundred women and children have been trampled to death. What does a door-keeper in addition matter?"

"A madman!" murmured someone warningly to those about him.

"You are a murderer!" cried another.

"No, no," protested the stranger, almost good-humouredly; "I have only disabled your man with a bullet in the shoulder, after all. But, believe me, you will be face to face with civil war in less than seven days, and even the life of a zealous servant is a small matter in averting that calamity."

"Mad—quite mad!" repeated the former speaker cautiously. "Better humour him until someone comes."

"Who are you, and what do you want?" demanded the Premier, who saw more indication of method than of madness.

"My name," replied the unceremonious being, "is Brampton Reed. Possibly," he said, turning sharply to the Minister for War, "the name has a distantly familiar ring, Sir William?"

"Ah," replied Mollineux, enlightened, "the man with a cra—an idea for individual flying."

"No," corrected Reed in sharp raillery, "the man who *had* a craze for individual flying three years ago; the man who has something very like the perfection of individual flying to-day. No obligation to your department, Sir William. You saw nothing in it."

"We were advised that the project of self-propelled flight was chimerical. The tendency was all towards aeroplanes and dirigibles. You were out of the movement."

"We shall be in it to-night if we come to terms," said Reed, with grim humour. "What would you give to be able to plant a patriotic Englishman, carrying five pounds of thorite, on each of the Krupplins—to control a flight of human aerial torpedoes, eh, Sir William?"

"Can you do this, Mr. Reed?" demanded the Premier, with a tortured incredulity. Taylor was forgotten. All looked towards the man who suggested the bare possibility of the miracle of salvation.

"I will be frank with you," replied Reed, coming up to the table. "I can—but at the same time I should have preferred this to have come in six months' time."

"You can make a flight even in this weather?"

"The wind is nothing—nothing. On the contrary, it helps a practised wingman. But there are other details —technical details. We have had to do everything in the face of terrible discouragement. We wanted men, reliable, devoted men, such as you could have put in our way. We wanted facilities of a dozen kinds. Most of all, we wanted time. Practice, unending practice, is the secret of alatics. We even wanted money; money, good lord! and you are on the point of paying an indemnity of a hundred millions to save London!"

"We are taking a terrible risk if we permit this forlorn hope, Mr. Reed," said Mollineux.

"So are we, Sir William," replied Reed caustically. "Strictly in a personal way you cannot take a greater one than we shall. As regards permitting the attempt, allow me to point out to you that you cannot prevent it. At the same time I want official recognition. I want something in return, and I want information. Well, there are my terms," and he threw a few sheets of paper on to the table. "How many Krupps really are there, by the way? The newspapers are all—well, as usual."

"Five," replied some one. "They have opened wireless communication with us from the neighbourhood of the Goodwins."

"Five! and we have only seven competent men, including myself," exclaimed Reed. "So be it; we can take no risks. You know what that means, Mr. Muir?"

"Not absolutely, though I draw a natural inference," replied the Premier, looking up from the manuscript which Reed had brought. "What does it mean?"

"Every man will have to throw his missile from a distance of not more than thirty feet. Five pounds of thorite will grind up everything within a radius of fifty yards. You deduce the element of risk, Mr. Muir?"

"In other words, every man will go to certain death?"

"Precisely. Every man who fails to blow himself into his constituent elements will have bungled. Well, we all had one eye on that contingency when we trained. If only we'd had more time it might have been avoided. Time: practice, practice, practice. Please remember that for the new aerial department, Mr. Muir."

"I see that you stipulate for that, Mr. Reed," said the Minister of War, glancing down the paper. "Two power standard of air-fleet,' 'aerial stations,' 'corps of

wingmen,' and so forth. I think after this experience you can safely leave that to any Government in power."

"I could safely accept the personal word of any member of the Cabinet in a simple straightforward matter of millions," replied Reed bluntly. "But the collective assurance of a Government on a matter of national safety and aerial supremacy—oh no, Sir William!"

"We shall not differ on that point, Mr. Reed," said the Premier, taking up a pen to sign the document. "The money will be found."

"Money!" exclaimed Reed broadly. "I don't think that that detail will trouble you, Mr. Muir. No more warships after to-day, you know—nothing more expensive than a submarine."

"I see that you also require certain provision made in the case of your associates."

"Yes; some of them have people, and so on," said Reed carelessly.

"But," continued the Premier, "I fail to see any reference to yourself."

"I, on the other hand, have none."

"But surely, out of everything that a gratefully indebted country can offer in return for so colossal a service, there might be something?"

"That is my whim, Mr. Muir—that there should be nothing."

For the second time during that momentous Council the proceedings were interrupted from without. There was a knock, and close upon it a police-inspector entered.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but there has been a disturbance, and one of your servants has been shot," he explained. "I thought that you might require my attendance."

"Thank you, Inspector Holstan. I shall be glad if you will see that Taylor has the best attention and

everything that he can possibly require," replied the Premier.

"Very good, sir." He still lingered, however, and his eye rested on Brampton Reed suspiciously. "I understand," he ventured, "that this gentleman——"

"That is all we require," said the Premier, with suave decision. "Mr. Reed is—one of ourselves."

II

"Tilbury; Gravesend," indicated one of the alert looking young men standing on the upper platform of *Die Wasser-jungfer*. "Chatham and Rochester there together. Woolwich? No, you cannot identify it. It is among the glow over there—London."

"Really London at last," soliloquised another. *"Ach!"*

"You may well say 'at last,' Steinetz," struck in an aviator-engineer. "Ten years ago I myself dated this invasion for 1906."

"Fortunately for you that you were wrong," said the first speaker, "or you would not have been in it. Late or not, here we are—where the great Napoleon never got."

"Ah, he was too much for himself and for conquest, that Corsican. If he had been inspired by humanity and a love of fatherland, he would have gone further."

The five great Krupp-Parsevals were lying "anchored" in what was then known, for the purposes of aerial navigation, as the fourth atmospheric zone, above the fields and villages of Kent. The previous day, immediately upon Germany's official notification to the British Government that Lord Shipley's action with regard to the Ankori affair was regarded as a hostile move, the world for the first time learned of the secret works in West-

phalia, and of the existence of an unsuspected fleet of air-ships. At the same time details were freely published, from which it became obvious, so far advanced over all other types of rivals were these incomparable vessels, that the world, if need be, lay at their mercy.

It was no longer policy to conceal their presence or their movements, for the panic which their mere approach created was a valuable factor in enforcing their demands. Proceeding in full daylight at a leisurely twenty-five miles an hour, therefore, they crossed the North Sea at a comparatively low altitude, saluting on their way the *Prinz Ludwig,* which conveyed the departing German Ambassador from these shores. Their arrival above Thanet was timed to be simultaneous with the presentation of Berlin's demands; upon being informed by wireless that this had taken place, they sailed in extended line formation very slowly towards London. At nightfall they rose a few hundred feet higher in the air, and hung motionless. They were quite secure from attack. No guns then in use could be trained on them at an efficient range even if their outlines could have been discerned. As a matter of fact, ingenious chromatic and mechanical devices rendered the Krupp-Parsevals practically invisible even in the dusk. Their engines were absolutely noiseless; and the only outward lights they displayed were Lietke-ray emanations, serviceable enough to the pilots and signal-readers of the other vessels when seen through their sensitised glasses, but non-existent to everyone else.

"Is it true, Otto," inquired the engineer, "that in England they allow one to inspect their forts and barracks at will?"

"Oh yes," admitted Otto, with a ready smile, "it is quite so. The defences of the Thames have been my especial work during the past two years."

"Is it that they are lax, or the system?"

"They are so well satisfied that they are safe: that, no matter, everything must come right. *Ganz sicher*—'cock-sure,' as they would say. That is why. Now and then a little subterfuge is necessary, you understand; but it is quite simple. The barrack arrangement I am thoroughly familiar with, and I know all the ins and outs of the Bank of England and the Mint."

"So?" nodded one of the group. "A useful detail."

"Oh, it was very interesting in itself," said Otto modestly. "I am very fond of London—and even of the English to some extent. London has a great charm to me, I confess, and from a sentimental point of view I should be sorry to see it shelled. Also, I have many good Cockney friends."

"'Cock-sure,' that is to say?"

"No, no, no," corrected Otto; "this is an idiom denoting one who hears certain bells—it is a legend. There is a very agreeable family among whom I boarded in Kensington. I should really regret the demolition of that house in Sinclair Road by any chance."

"There were young ladies, perhaps?" asked another, with respect.

"Not at all," replied Otto; "but they were a very pleasant family and could appreciate Schiller."

"That is very well," said one; "but I certainly think that I have heard the Fräulein Elisabeth refer to some young English misses."

"Another house Otto would regret to see demolished, evidently," suggested the engineer slyly.

"It is quite true, another house," admitted Otto good-humouredly. "This one was in Highgate, another part of London altogether. The young ladies were four in number, and although we did not discuss Schiller we

became great friends. Indeed, I think that Miss Phyllis and I might be considered to be betrothed."

"This is romantic," said another of the group; "the gallant young soldier and the daughter of the enemy. Shall you return after peace is made and claim your bride?"

"I do not think so," replied Otto, turning over the subject seriously. "The father was engaged in the shipping business, so that he will inevitably be ruined by the war, and from a financial point of view the connection would scarcely be advantageous. Then Miss Phyllis herself, though a very charming companion for the theatre or ballroom, does not, I fancy, possess those housewifely qualities which——"

Thus it happened that Otto Kastl died with his English sweetheart's name almost upon his lips, for this was the classical moment when the first shock of aerial warfare too place. How Brampton Reed had disposed his meagre force we are not told, nor is there record of the name of him who struck the first blow. From the circumstances Reed must inevitably have decided upon a simultaneous attack upon the five Krupplins by five of his wingmen, with two others, of whom he himself, as the most skilful flier, was properly one, held in reserve. But even with the most careful preparation, in the darkness of the night, and extending along a battle-line of nearly two miles, the attack became a scattered one, whereof it chanced that the man to whose care fell the pilot *Wasser-jungfer* launched the signal.

So far as the group on the upper platform of *Die Wasser-jungfer* was concerned, it may have been unheralded extinction, absolute and immediate destruction striking irresistibly from the unprobed recesses of the night. Or there may have been a momentary vision of a vast and shadowy spectral bird sweeping round dexter-

ously on the utilised force of the gale, and poising for a moment above the deck, where a startled and irresolute handful of men stood resourceless despite the thousand ingenious devices of defence possessed by the wonderful vessel beneath their feet.

That moment closed the life-history of *Die Wasser-jungfer*. To her consorts, from the vantage-ground of their skillfully maintained line towards the south-east, it seemed as though the pilot-ship had suddenly turned into a tormented thing of fire, in which all her parts, human and inanimate, strove for disentanglement. Then darkness closed over the space again, the fantastic shreds of wreckage fell earthward, and even littered their own decks, and the scudding constellation of blazing tags of fabric and cordage was carried beyond their sight.

Under the surprise, the crews of the other vessels at once fell into their appointed places and duties with disciplined precision. For a minute there existed a doubt whether *Die Wasser-jungfer* had been attacked or become the victim of her own magazine. So well known and apprised were the insignificant forces upon which England could call for battle in the air, and so unequivocal had been the wording of the ultimatum as to the terrible reprisal that would follow a wanton—as it was then deemed it must be—attack on the Krupplins, that some desperate mischance was the first thought in every German mind; but even as the united searchlights of the remaining fleet blazed out into the night, *Der Phönix,* the third vessel along the line, was seen to be struck by the same appalling force, and, falling apart midway, cleft through envelope, structure and decks, she pitched headlong into the under-space, exploding and careening strangely as she fell.

In the face of these disasters a splendid discipline remained, but much of the elaborately contrived machin-

ery failed to respond to the emergency. The wireless-telegraph system broke down on every vessel, and out of this fact arose the curious discovery that among the obscure gases generated by exploding thorite in the upper atmosphere was one that arrested the wave action of an electrical discharge. The signal-readers were unable to take off the Lietke-ray readings among all the aerial disturbances, so that each vessel remained isolated, and acted on its own initiative. Prince Friedrich, who commanded the fleet from the deck of the flagship *Die Schwalbe* (the second in line, and now a mile removed from her nearest support), failing to discover any sign of open attack, at once decided to sail away at full speed from so disastrous a spot, and to wait until daylight enabled him to operate prudently. This order was indeed signalled from *Die Schwalbe* by means of her searchlight, but in the multiplicity of lights and cross-lights the significance of the flashes passed unrecognised. *Der Geier* and *Der Fliegende Fisch* therefore remained, pressing to their service every device for repelling attack which they possessed, while *Die Schwalbe* stole away to the northwest, silently, and with every light obscured.

From the details supplied by the invaders who survived the battle of Elmstead Down it is generally surmised that the second wingman in the line of attack—the one through whose defection *Die Schwalbe* was able to slip away untouched—was probably struck by a flying fragment of *Die Wasser-jungfer,* and at this point in the fight a second mishap weakened the successful chance of Reed's desperate venture.

In the uncertainty of their position *Der Geier* and *Der Fliegende Fisch* had drawn closer together when the fourth and the fifth wingmen simultaneously swept into the effective range of their lights and rifles. The changed position of the air-ships gave them a moment

of indecision, and the fifth man drew off and beat upwards rather than run the risk that they should both fling themselves upon the same target. The movement was fatal to himself; for although his companion selected and successfully wrecked *Der Geier,* the evenly moving figure in the clear white light drew a desperate fusillade from the marksmen on both vessels. It mattered little in that position whether he was touched by a single bullet or pierced by a hundred: his wings collapsed, and a flattened, earth-churned coppice marked the spot where he touched the earth.

The miscarriage must have taken place before Reed's eyes. He had probably by that time deduced the failure of his second man. He at once launched his only reserve, keeping himself for the more arduous and desperate pursuit of the flagship. This man was a strong flier and resourceful—there is personal testimony of that, for all the survivors of Elmstead Down came from *Der Fliegende Fisch.* Keeping directly under the body of the vessel he ascended on the spiral stroke. On the decks above, the bomb-turning nets had been fixed in position, and every available man stood ready to act on the first sign of attack. The wingman gained the height he desired, made a short sharp circle to acquire the requisite impetus, and dashed himself bodily against the stern of *Der Fliegende Fisch.* A third of the structure of the frail vessel was torn away, but, by a miracle, sufficient of the comparted envelope remained to sustain what was left, and the unwieldy wreck swung and careered away before the force of the gale, to be finally stranded along the coast of Wales.

Had the battle been fought out on any other element, the reckoning must have pronounced it an unqualified victory, but that thought brought no satisfaction to Brampton Reed as he witnessed the destruction of the

last visible Krupp-Parseval. He had undertaken to destroy all, and he had failed. However great the moral effect of the night's work might be, the one air-ship that had escaped him—now morbidly alert, bitter for revenge, and armed at every point—still dominated the situation. Nor was it by any means certain what course offered the best chance of retrieving the position. The speedy, well-stocked vessel might press on to London, might seek out the fleets and annihilate them, destroy the dockyards, go northwards against the great ports and commercial cities, or adopt any one of a dozen plausible lines of offence. Pursuit was hopeless; chance encounter incredible.

Within thirty seconds he had decided to go back to London and lay everything before the Government. His own motor-car was waiting in readiness for any service. He found it, threw a single word to the driver and got in. The driver, himself an even more taciturn man, merely nodded as he took the wheel.

Reed carefully replaced the charge of thorite in its special receptacle and began to unbuckle his flying-gear. A sudden flood of light sweeping across the interior of the car compelled his attention. He pushed down the window and looked out, just as the taciturn driver brought the car to a standstill on his own initiative.

For an appreciable period of time Reed was unable to grasp the meaning of what he saw, so blank of any hope of the kind had been his mind. High above, but a very few miles distant on the lateral plane, two air-ships rode and manœuvred in the full blaze of each other's whirling searchlights. His tired brain clogged at the mystery. He would, in an instant, have leapt to the astounding surpassing luck of *Die Schwalbe* revealing herself—but *two* . . .? The truth slipped into his mind like a keen-edged ray of light. One indeed was *Die Schwalbe;* the

other the Army Dirigible No. 5! Forgotten among the distraction of changed plans, or with an heroic defiance of orders, the glorious, maligned *Quo Vadis?* had flown to the sound of the guns. With a splendid opportuneness that no mathematical precision could have bettered, she had blundered across the course of the retreating flagship, and thereby done the one thing that could save her country. For, be it remembered, *Die Schwalbe* knew nothing of wingmen or the real means of attack. She saw before her the one puny antagonist whose easy defeat she had anticipated as a possible incident of her triumphal passage, and it was inevitable that she should connect this visible and known foe with the destruction —by some chain of incredible fortune—of her consorts. Her searchlights revealed no other menace, and she bent her energies to the sure and complete annihilation of the audacious challenger.

Below, the car turned, and skimmed along the highways and the lanes in its desperate race, of which the prize was the destiny of two empires. It could only be a matter of minutes. . . .

Above, the duellists measured their long weapons and turned warily as they sought each other's vital parts. *Quo Vadis?* cherished no illusions about the outcome; only she was garnering immortelles other than she knew of. She had, among the thousand odds against her, one slight advantage: she was willing—eager—to meet disaster if she could but involve her adversary in that fall. It was denied her.

. . . . . .

An exulting cry ran along the decks of *Die Schwalbe* when, outmanœuvred in the exchanges, the gallant but hopeless *Quo Vadis?* laid herself at a fatal disadvantage. Every destructive weapon in her opponent's armoury concentrated on that opening, and the torn and shattered

wreck plunged downwards with an ever-increasing impetus. A German cheer, led by Prince Friedrich, greeted the achievement, the searchlights swung downward to illumine the path of the falling vessel, and every available man crowded the nearer rail of the flagship's side.

If any had turned he would have seen a strangely outlined figure gain their deck. For a moment Brampton Reed stood with uplifted hand. Nothing could arrest the fall of his arm; nothing avert the destruction held in the uplifted hand. In that supreme moment the inspiration of a lifetime seemed to be forming into a message or a human cry of portentous meaning that he must first deliver. . . .

The men at the rail talked, leaned forward, laughed, pointed, and rejoiced in victory . . . then perished.

Sandgate, 1908.

XI

The Great Hockington Find

MR. LESTER, of the firm of Lester and Scott, antiquarians, picture and bric-à-brac dealers, commission agents, and general high-class pawnbrokers, stood before the fire in his private room with the pleasantest expression imaginable upon his slightly Hebrew features, and all, apparently, because an insignificant little disc of tin—as it would certainly have appeared to the uninterested—of about the sixe of a sixpence had come to him by post that morning, packed clumsily in an ordinary wooden matchbox, which bore the postmark of an obscure Midland village.

Mr. Lester took the antique and bijoutry department of the business, leaving his partner Scott the pictures, stones and occasionally wine, while both interested themselves equally in the discreet money-lending transactions that brought them into profitable connection with certain circles of the aristocracy. Neither, by the way, had any hereditary claim to the name he bore, both "Lester" and "Scott" having been adopted as good, solid, middle-class English cognomens, likely to inspire confidence and respect.

"Look here, Scotty, my boy," cried Lester boisterously, as his partner entered in response to his message, "what do you think of that for a little beauty? Didn't I tell you that those quiet, gentlemanly ads. in the country papers would bring in something?"

Mr. Scott took the proffered coin without any show

of enthusiasm. A cold-eyed man, with a projecting lower jaw, that at once suggested comparison with that of a pike, he carried a mercilessly depreciating manner even into his most private life.

"Anglo-Saxon?" he replied shortly. "What's the thing worth?"

"Beornwulf, King of Mercia; lovely fine condition, too. Fetch a tenner any time at Sotheby's, even on a wet day."

"Oh, that all?" said Scott dispassionately. "What do they want for it?" Not that he despised such crumbs of commerce as "tenners" any more than his prototype the pike neglects the smaller minnows, but his personal tastes ran in the direction of high finance and large transactions.

"No, my boy, that isn't all; not by a long, long chalk," replied Mr. Lester, with imperturbable good-humour. "That's only the sample that came along in a chip match-box, as though it might be a penn'orth of tin-tacks. Listen to this:

"'*One Tree Cottage,*
High Cross,
Hockington.

"'RESPECTED SIRS,—Seeing an advertisment that you buy old and strange money, and such-like, I take the libberty ('Oh, patriarchal Moses, Scott, he takes the liberty!' ejaculated Mr. Lester rapturously) of sending you one which I juge to be such, and respeckfully enquiring how much you would give by the hundred, having recently got some.—Yours obedient,

"'JAMES CLAY.'"

Mr. Scott's mouth opened and closed unconsciously, until he resembled a monstrous pike more than ever.

"By the hundred!" he murmured, in an awe-struck voice.

"It's a find, of course—treasure trove," continued Lester keenly. "Ever heard of the Beaworth find, my son? Ten thousand William the Conq. pennies kicked up in a cart-wheel rut. Or the Hexham case? Eight thousand Saxon stycas fished out of an old tin bucket. This will be known to history as the great Hockington find, and Lester and Scott will corner the lot. Hundreds! Why shouldn't we scoop thousands, tens of thousands?"

"I'll tell you why," replied his partner, reverting from momentary surprise to his habitual business pessimism. "Because this fellow Clay will promptly get drunk on the strength of his luck and open his mouth in the village ale-house. By now it will be all over the place, and the owner of the land, and the tenant, and the lord of the manor, and the Crown agent will all be there at this moment, screwing the last denier out of him."

"No, no, no," exclaimed Lester, with a deprecating gesture. "It won't be like that at all, my dear fellow. You're a good business man in your own line, I don't deny it; but you've got no romance, Scott; no imagination. This honest yokel Clay is certain to be a shrewd, sober, thrifty son of toil of the kind that has made this England of ours what it is. A little boorish and slow-witted, perhaps, but none the worse for that. Busied with the prosaic duty of mangling wurzels, or whatever his occupation may be, his implement one day happens to go a few inches deeper than usual, and then, as the poet says, 'The ploughshare turns them out.' Your town artisan would grovel on his hands and knees at once, and run about half demented, and give the show away; but our stolid, cautious friend Clay does nothing of the kind. I see and know the man from head to foot. He——"

"What are you going to offer him?" interrupted Scott

impatiently. "Silver is 2*s.* 2*d.* this morning. Try him with 2*s.* 6*d.* the ounce."

"Stop a bit, though," replied Lester, coming down at once to the realms of pure business. "It's no use being wasteful. If we tell him that this is very bad silver he may jump at much less."

"Well, it's your affair," remarked the other, "and one thing is certain: if there are hundreds or thousands of this particular coin coming into the market, the price goes all to pieces."

Mr. Lester winked cunningly. "Leave that to me, my boy," he replied. "If we collar the lot the trade needn't never know nothing. We can spread it over as many years as we like. Quite a few can go to New York and Philadelphia with solid pedigrees, and one or two to Edinburgh. Then the private cabinets will take ever so many direct, and when they're filled up we can begin to work a sprinkling discreetly into the London sales. Besides, you don't imagine that they're all alike, do you? This poor jay Clay don't know a Saxon sceatta from a trouser-button, of course, but there are certain to be dozens of types, and most likely from several reigns."

"Get them first," hinted the material Scott.

"I'm coming to that, Scott. Indeed it was on the tip of my tongue," protested Lester. "Heavens! What machines of business this London of ours turns us into. No romance. What do we live for, after all? My ambition is to make a million, and to be able to call a duchess 'Dear lady' without being kicked out. Yours is to make two millions, and to have a medal struck in your honour as the endower of a national Yiddish theatre. It's all vanity, Joey. This morning a lark was singing outside my bedroom window——"

"In Maida Vale!" said Scott contemptuously.

"Well, it was a tom-tit, or a sparrow, or something.

Anyway, it gave me a taste for fields. I shall go down to this pretty little Hockington place right away, and finish the business at once. It's too enticing to risk anything over."

"Just what I should have suggested all along," replied the partner. "Then if the things are scattered you may be able to pick up a few. What shall we write the fellow?"

Mr. Lester thought for a moment, considering the matter from its unromantic side.

"I'll drop him a line by the next post that there's practically no market for these things, but if he'll send a few more along as samples we'll see what can be done. That'll keep him going. Then I'll be on the spot—not connected with L. and S., mind you, but just a leisurely passing tourist with a fishing-rod or a golf-club, see?—and you may call me a descendant of Manasseh the Unlucky if I don't bring it off."

Late the following afternoon, as a remarkably pretty and rustically picturesque maiden was leaning over the gate of One Tree Cottage, a portly middle-aged gentleman, whose white hat and fancy waistcoat proclaimed his determination to wear a holiday air (despite the fact that he looked as little in keeping with a country lane as a columbine would be at a Quakers' meeting), stopped before her and inquired the distance to Hockington.

"About a mile, sir," replied the damsel with an artless curtsy—a thing Mr. Lester had hitherto believed to be extinct—"or rather more. Straight on."

"Dear, dear me," groaned Mr. Lester. He had, indeed, already walked three times that distance through misdirection. "These country miles are very long, my dear. Do you think that you could make me a cup of tea—for payment, of course?"

"Oh, yes, sir," she replied brightly. "We were think-

ing of putting out a sign, only so few people pass here that it didn't hardly seem worth while."

She opened the gate with another curtsy, and led the astute gentleman through a patch of overgrown garden into a tiny cottage. Nothing could have suited Mr. Lester's purpose better. In ten minutes he had learned that her name was Rosie Clay, and that she and her brother Jim lived there alone; that they had only recently come from another part of the country where work was scarce, and that Jim had for the time got temporary employment on a farm a couple of miles away. So pleasantly was the susceptible gentleman progressing that he was quite annoyed when his business side insisted upon something being done towards the real object of his visit.

On leaving town he had put into his pocket a few silver pennies of the early Edwards, common enough coins but sufficiently like the Saxon pieces to suggest comparison. With a word about payment he now took out a handful of money, and, spreading it on the table before him, carelessly sorted out the silver pennies from among the current coins.

"Oh," exclaimed the girl, with sudden interest, "you've got some of that funny old money too."

"Yes," he admitted, without any sign of the excitement he began to feel. "I'm fond of old things of that sort. Why, have you got any?"

"Jim has," she replied. "He found a whole crockful, digging in the little meadow at the back. Hundreds and hundreds of them. But oh!" she exclaimed with a belated recollection, "I wasn't to say a word to anyone. He would be dreadfully angry."

"Not in the circumstances, I'll be bound, my dear," he reassured her. "Your brother very prudently did not want anyone about here to know, but I'm different. I suppose he don't mind selling them?"

"He did say something about it," she confessed.

"Very well, then. Why shouldn't I buy them? Here I am on the spot, sent by Providence, so to speak. But one thing at a time; what shall we say for the tea?"

"Fourpence?" she murmured, with bashful hesitation (he had consumed quite a substantial repast), and then catching his expression of momentary surprise, added in confusion, "Threepence?"

"No, no, my dear," protested Mr. Lester generously. "Fourpence; not a penny less. It's quite worth it. Now, will you let me see these rum old things your brother found?"

"Indeed I would," she replied, "but I can't, because he's hidden them away somewhere."

"Oh," said Mr. Lester, a little blankly. "He seems to be a suspicious sort of cove, this brother of yours. What time will he be back?"

"Generally about half-past six," she replied. "But I have a few here that Jim gave me. I'm going to have a bangle made of them when he says I may."

"A bangle!" exclaimed Mr. Lester, starting violently "Oh, suffer—— No, no, my dear. You shall have a better bangle than this old truck for that pretty little arm, or I'll be hanged." He took the half-dozen coins which she had poured from a little china ornament, and examined them closely through his magnifying glass. As he had anticipated, they belonged to three different Mercian kings, and exhibited six different types. All were passably rare, and in the most exquisite condition. To the man who united the enthusiasm of the numismatist with the rapacity of the dealer, the thought of "hundreds and hundreds" was a dazzling intoxication.

"I buy such things if they come my way," he remarked expansively, when he had satisfied himself. "It's a sort of harmless craze of mine, and it don't cost me anything

to speak of. I gave an old fellow half-a-crown for a handful of these the other day, and he was well pleased. What do you think your brother wants for the lot?"

She was sure she did not know, she said.

"Oh, come now," said Mr. Lester, with just a suggestion of masterful authority. "You've some idea. Out with it."

With downcast eyes, for the subject of money seemed actually to distress her, she admitted hearing Jim remark that from their size they must be sixpences, and that, therefore, they could not be worth less than sixpence each.

"Sixpence each!" exclaimed Mr. Lester appalled. "Sixpence *each!* Sixpence of itself may not seem very much, my dear, but when you come to consider hundreds of sixpences, why it's a fortune."

"Yes, indeed," agreed the girl, simply, "and as he said they couldn't be worth *less* than sixpence, he may want a shilling."

Mr. Lester could not restrain a professional gesture of despair. His faith in James Clay's arcadian simplicity had received a shock. All hope of acquiring the treasure at the price of "bad silver" would have to be abandoned. The only grain of satisfaction he could extract from the situation was that in any case the coins, from what he had seen, would be worth an average value of at least five pounds each.

"Here he is," exclaimed Rosie, as a footstep sounded on the path.

The door was thrown open, and a tall, well-made young labourer entered. He clattered his tools down in one corner, tossed his cap on to a chair, nodded unconcernedly to Mr. Lester, and forthwith demanded to know whether his tea was ready.

"I must plead guilty to wasting your charming sister's

time," interposed Mr. Lester gallantly. "Quite by accident it has come out that we are all interested in the subject of this old money that there's such a lot of about."

Clay bent a look towards his sister that made her tremble.

"Oh, come now," expostulated the visitor affably. "No harm done. You have 'em to sell and I'm willing to buy —at a reasonable figure, of course."

"There you're wrong, mister," said Clay stolidly. "I have none to sell."

Mr. Lester stared at him blankly, and Rosie forgot her nervousness in surprise.

"Why, Jim," she exclaimed, "and I told the gentleman that you wanted perhaps a shilling each!"

"That's like you, babbling," he retorted wrathfully. "Well, I don't."

"But—but——" protested the dealer.

"Look here," said Clay brusquely. "They're on offer to some gen'lemen up at London. Gimme them few that you have, Rose. You aren't to be trusted with anything; and then go to the shop and get me a penny stamp."

"This is all very well, my young friend," said Mr. Lester, as Rosie departed, and her brother proceeded to pack up the coins in his rough-and-ready fashion, and to copy laboriously upon the cover an address from a letter, which the observant gentleman recognised as his own, "very nice and high-flown, but it ain't business."

Clay answered him with a look of native shrewdness. "I don't tell Rosie everything," he explained. "But as you seem to know so much about it, I don't mind you seeing what I come across in the *Herald*. What d'ye make of this?"

It was a small newspaper cutting that he passed across, and on it Mr. Lester read as follows:

> "At Messrs. Puttick and Simpson's sale-rooms last week, an Elizabeth sixpence, described as 'brilliant,' realised fifteen shillings."

"Now," continued the young man, "why shouldn't these be Elizabeth sixpences, too? I can read an 'E' and an 'L' and something that might be a 'Z' here and there. I don't altogether make out that 'brilliant' because they are mostly blackish, but I've rubbed one here with a bit of sandpaper, and it comes as bright as a mirror; it do indeed."

Tears, real tears, stood in Mr. Lester's eyes as he regarded the shocking wreck of a priceless Beornwulf from which Clay had succeeded in removing almost every trace of the impression. Argument was useless, he recognised, and, even worse, delay was dangerous. The only thing was to buy, to get the coins away at any reasonable cost—say as much under a quarter of their value as possible.

"How many are there?" he inquired mildly.

"Over two thousand. I counted that many, and there were hundreds more."

"At least you can let me see them?"

"Aye. I don't mind now that it's dark. They're put away in the garden to be safe, and I don't want any chaps to see me getting them up."

"That's right," nodded Mr. Lester. "You can't be too careful, my dear young friend. Two thousand! Two thousand shillings, I may remind you, represent a hundred pounds.

"At two shillings," he continued, musingly, as he received no encouragement, "there would, of course, be

two hundred pounds. Now I will give you, not because they are worth it, but because I think money ought to be more evenly divided, I will give you two hundred and fifty pounds."

"You'd better see them," replied Clay, rising.

He was back in less than five minutes, carrying a small tin biscuit-box, to which the crumbs of damp earth still clung. When the lid was removed the one feeble candle shone on layer upon layer of coins, all deepened by the action of time into a dull, obscuring black. What rarities, what hitherto unknown types and unique examples might not be revealed when, by a safe and proper process, all this disfigurement was removed?

Mr. Lester ran his hand through the tinkling mass. It was too bitter. He felt that he really could not leave them.

"I'll take them as they stand," he said. "I'll have all the risk and uncertainty, and I'll give you—yes, I'll give you five hundred pounds! A fortune!"

The sound of someone coming along the road caused Clay hastily to replace the lid, and as the gate creaked he disappeared through the back door to re-bury his treasure. It proved to be Rosie returning.

"Well? Eh?" urged Mr. Lester, as Clay re-entered.

He shook his head, and proceeded to affix the stamp to the packet.

"I'm going to post this now," he said shortly. "You lock up, Rose, till I'm back again."

"I'll go with you," volunteered Mr. Lester, who had a pardonable desire to see the packet safely posted. "I like an evening walk in any direction."

They walked together as far as the wall letter-box at the cross-roads, a quarter of a mile away, Mr. Lester smoking an aromatic cigar and explaining the beauty of the evening, his companion taciturn and unresponsive.

"Five hundred pounds," remarked the dealer, as they stood at the cross-roads, and it became perfectly obvious that he would have to reintroduce the subject himself or leave it as it was. "It's a gigantic sum. Consider what you could do with it, my dear young fellow. You could take a farm, get married, put up for the village council here and doubtless become a churchwarden. The fact is, I overbid myself, and I'm beginning to repent."

"Well, good-night, then," said Clay.

"Stop a bit," urged Mr. Lester. "I did it and I don't go back on my word."

"It isn't fifteen shillings each, and that seems to be the value of these old Queen Elizabeth sixpences," remarked Clay stolidly.

"Don't mind my saying so, my good chap, but you don't know the first thing you're talking about," replied Mr. Lester with some warmth, and it was not the least part of his annoyance that while Clay certainly did not know what he was talking about, it was quite impossible to correct him without the risk of putting him on the track of something even more dangerous. "One article may be worth a price, but if you go and turn two thousand of them on the market, they become unsaleable."

"There's something in that," admitted Clay. "I've seen it with sheep."

"Very well then, be reasonable. Is it a deal?"

"I'll think about it."

That was the utmost that could be got from the unsatisfactory young man, and they parted on the understanding that the dealer should come again on the following day for a definite answer.

Mr. Lester spent a tedious evening at the Railway Inn, and, as it rained, an even duller day. Shortly after six he reached One Tree Cottage again, determined to clinch the bargain by the concession of another hundred.

"Rosie's out, but you can go in and sit down," said Clay, who was already back and working in his garden. "I must finish these few rows of cabbage while it's light."

Mr. Lester went in, but he did not sit down. The window of the room commanded a view of Clay, and the visitor utilised his time by peering into the ornaments and corners to see whether a few Beornwulfs or a stray Ludeca had not been left about. The survey brought him to the mantelpiece, where two envelopes instantly caught his eye. One was that which contained his own letter, but at the sight of the name embossed on the flap of the other, Mr. Lester's heart for one crowded moment stood still. It was that of another London firm, Lester and Scott's particular trade rivals, and young Clay's procrastinating indifference began to assume another face.

Mr. Lester's hesitation only lay in the direction of assuring himself that he was in no danger of being seen. Then he took out the letter and read as follows:

> "Dear Sir,—We have received yours accompanying silver coin. Owing to a slight ambiguity of expression we are in doubt whether you have only this one coin or several others similar. If the latter is the case we strongly advise you to bring them up for our inspection without delay, and will guarantee your expenses. If, however, this is the only one you possess, we will make you an offer for it on hearing from you again.
>
> "Yours truly,
>
> "J. S. Mercer and Company."

He replaced the letter, ascertained from the postmark that it had only been delivered that day, and sat down to think. He was thus engaged when Rosie entered a few minutes later.

"Oh, sir," she exclaimed, as soon as she saw him. "What do you think? Jim says now that he's thinking of going to London. Do, do stop him!"

"My dear young lady, your brother seems to be a person of well-developed determination, tempered by a rather questionable commercial morality," he replied testily. "How on earth am I to stop him?"

"It's all through that wretched old money I know," she continued wildly. "A letter came this morning and now he says that he will go, and I know that he will be led astray and ruined in that wicked place, because he is really so simple. Oh, sir, buy them and then he needn't go."

"Well, I've done my little best, I must say," exclaimed Mr. Lester.

"Yes, indeed," she replied quickly. "He must have gone to the Green Man after leaving you, for he was quite talkative when he came back. He told me that you had offered him six hundred pounds."

"Five hundred," corrected the gentleman.

"Was it, sir? He must have got the idea of six hundred somehow: it seemed quite fixed in his mind. He said that he meant to have a thousand pounds yet, and he didn't care whether you gave it or someone else."

"A thousand pounds!" cried Mr. Lester, really much relieved to know the worst at last. "Oh, ridiculous, preposterous, unheard-of! No one would give it, eh?"

"No, indeed," agreed the maiden. "I don't think that all the old money in the world would be worth that. It's just a big number that he has got into his head."

"It's grotesque," fumed the dealer. "I don't mind telling you, my dear, as it's no good now, that seven-hundred-and-fifty was the limit I was prepared to go to. And that would have been a wildly generous offer."

"I'm sure it would be, sir. I wish we could persuade him to take it."

"But I haven't made it," he reminded her.

"No, and it would be no good," she said dolefully.

"We shall have to give it up then, eh?"

Rosie pondered a minute, deeply.

"I think, sir," she suggested prettily, "that if I could go to him and say that you had let out to me that you would give eight hundred pounds, and remind him that last night he had said a thousand, he would say, as they do hereabouts, 'Well, I don't mind splitting the difference.' "

Mr. Lester looked at the ingenuous maiden with an admiration he usually reserved for excessively rare coins in mint condition.

"Go and see, my dear," he said at length, "and you may earn a really beautiful bangle. Only, for heaven's sake don't forget and *begin* at the nine hundred with him."

. . . . . .

About noon, two days later, Mr. Lester entered his partner's room, and flinging a suit-case into one arm-chair and himself into another, groaned several times as though he was in acute physical pain.

"What the deuce is the matter?" demanded Mr. Scott sharply. "Where have you been?"

"At Mercer's, learning the worst," moaned Mr. Lester. "Scott, if you utter one word of reproach I shall go down and commit suicide on that five-hundred-guinea Persian carpet."

"Well, well," replied Mr. Scott, "I see. You've lost three days and not got any of the things. Can't be helped."

So far from being soothed Mr. Lester roared like an agonised elephant.

"Not got any!" he almost shrieked. "I've wasted three days and I've got *all* the damned things. Would to the prophets that each one was a millstone round the perjured neck of that accursed young man!"

"You mean?" demanded Scott, with increasing deliberation.

"They're forgeries. All except the Beornwulf and the half-dozen I examined there in the daylight. Look for yourself."

Mr. Scott opened the case, then the biscuit tin, and took out a handful of coins.

"Forgeries!" he repeated with cold contempt. "Why, these would scarcely deceive even *me*. And you have paid for them the nine hundred pounds that you wired to be sent down to you in gold!"

"He insisted on gold," babbled Mr. Lester, reverting to an almost maudlin retrospective monotone. "When I offered him bills at three months he said in his bucolic way that bills were what he had to pay and he didn't want any of *them*. He said he had never seen a cheque or possessed a bank-note in his life, and he didn't understand *them*. All he understood was gold."

"You are neither a child nor a dotard in the ordinary way, Lester," said his partner. "What is at the bottom of this; were you drunk or was there a woman?"

"Two cups of tea for fourpence, and a simple village maiden," replied Lester hysterically. "Scott," he exclaimed, rousing himself, "the solid, blasting incomprehensible truth is that I was dazzled. I never examined the bulk; I never had the opportunity. I had seen the others and they were unimpeachable. I couldn't in any case examine two thousand five hundred coins in detail. I saw them for a moment by candle-light the first time. I saw them again under the same conditions when the bargain was struck, and I sealed them up. When I went

yesterday with young Walls to pay for them, we both carried loaded revolvers. We had much better have carried wax candles. An hour late, Clay reeled in blindly and offensively drunk. What with that, and with having only just time to catch the last up train, I simply cut the seals, opened the box—practically in the dark—and saw that they were intact."

"I still fail to understand your exact system of estimating the value of an important purchase," remarked Mr. Scott inflexibly.

"Go on; I don't blame you," said the unhappy man bitterly. "I shan't understand it myself in a month's time. But I do just now. It was the arcadian simplicity of the scene, the peaceful cottage interior, the fading light, the confiding rustic damsel, the toil-stained young labourer's return. If there had been a jarring note, a breath of suspicion—crash! But there wasn't."

"Who are they?"

Mr. Lester shook his head in miserable ignorance.

"I've been round to see Mercer's," he said. "The genuine coins were bought there a few weeks ago by a fashionably-dressed lady and gentleman. Mr. Mercer distinctly remembers the lady unconcernedly wrapping up the purchase in a sheet of his office notepaper, and putting it in one of his envelopes, as they sat in his private room. It's been a plant throughout, of course—the whole thing mapped out and worked beautifully to scale. I expect that she's an actress in real life, and he's probably someone whom you've let in over something at one time or another. Scott! in many things we are still as children groaning in this land of Egypt!"

"At all events," said Scott, rising, "if we have luck and the police are not more than normally obtuse, we may have the satisfaction of seeing someone go into the house of bondage over this."

"Sit down, Scotty, my boy; sit down," said Lester dispassionately. "It's heart-breaking, but it's got to be. It was clear treasure trove. We can't afford to make a fuss about it."

Scott took up a pen with admirable restraint.

"Then we'll regard it as a bad debt," was all he said. "What crumbs are there?"

"The Beornwulf, say twelve guineas; a hundred ounces of silver, eleven more; the six coins he sent you, thirty-five——"

"Stop a minute. What are those?"

Mr. Lester gripped the arms of his chair in a new frenzy.

"Sent on Wednesday night. D'ye mean to say you haven't had them?"

"Had nothing of the sort," said his partner.

"Under my very nose," groaned Mr. Lester, with a flash of intuition. "I see it all. Took out my letter and then coolly addressed the genuine bait to himself, to put it out of my way, right before my silly eyes! Scott, Scott, it's the finest finishing touch. I forgive them everything!"

Hampton Hill, 1907.

XII

Hautepierre's Star

HIS examination—searching according to the science of the age—concluded, the physician did not for the moment commit himself. There was some pretence in his affectation of consulting a weighty tome, a suggestion of embarrassment in his moving hand. Few would have called de la Spina tender-hearted, but on that summer afternoon he experienced a pang at the necessity of telling the high-spirited young nobleman, whose name might have passed as a synonym for the brightest prospects in the world, that the shadow of death was even now across his path.

"You have already seen the worthy Malot, I understand?" he said at length. "Did he express any definite opinion, M. le Marquis?"

"The worthy Malot did not beat about the bush," replied the Marquis lightly. "In fewer words than I can compress myself into he assured me that I should be dead within six months."

Relief possessed de la Spina. Who would have guessed that this debonair gallant knew already. Truly, beneath all its airs and fripperies, this aristocracy bred its own peculiar virtues.

"You have had no other opinion?" he asked.

"Why, yes, in a manner," replied the Marquis slyly. "For then, at the pressing instance of His Excellency, I went to consult that great and mysterious man who calls himself Algerbi el Santo."

"Pest of God!" cried the physician with sudden heat; "is the city mad? Juggler, charm-trucker, miracle-monger, poison-dabbler! Does time hang so heavy on your hands, monsieur?"

"On the contrary," replied the young man languidly, "having only six months of it left, I thought that I had better begin making myself acquainted with the sights of which one hears so much."

De la Spina stared, took snuff, and then vouchsafed a laugh.

"Well, and how did the Mouthpiece-of-Light receive you?"

"Very shortly indeed," replied the Marquis. "Prefacing that he had expected me, he informed me that the stars promised me a long and untroubled life, and then excused himself further detail on the plea that a future so devoid of problems was quite destitute of interest to himself."

A saturnine grin flickered about de la Spina's swart features.

"A long and untroubled life?" he repeated musingly.

"So he interpreted the stars," said the Marquis gravely.

"Spent doubtless among them?"

It was Hautepierre's turn to smile.

"One may hope so," he replied. "It is a better prospect than your six months on earth."

"Depends. Not in Paris, I should wager some would say."

"Ah! that might imperil both."

"I can only answer for my department," said the physician, dropping the jest and leaning forward to give point to his emphasis. "And meaning by such-and-such —well, so-and-so, rest certain that it will. A single deviation from the straightest conservation of your

strength might at any time be fatal. If you want to make sure, contrive to meet a sudden shock."

"So even the six months are strictly conditional? How would *you* spend them in my place, Spina?"

There was no hesitation about the answer.

"I should devote it to completing my treatise proving that the fish out of whose mouth St. Peter took the tribute-money was a gurnet and not a dory, as that mountain of pedantic ignorance, Gomez, and his trivial school contend."

Hautepierre was unable to suppress an indication of languid amusement.

"A worthy ambition," he murmured. "Yet might it not perhaps have been a gudgeon?"

De la Spina, who, as physician and confidant extraordinary to His Majesty the King, stood upon what ground he pleased, be it understood, frowned slightly.

"Do not jest with holy subjects, monsieur," he said reprovingly—"you, of all men, who are touched most closely. How, for that matter, will you prepare yourself? If by the accomplishment of no great work, in prayer at least?"

"Or the next place to it—in bed, doubtless," yawned the Marquis. "Must to Flambernard, then, that he finds another Keeper of the Routes. Within—six months or six weeks was it, did we say?"

Now at this point, illogically enough, the physician hesitated for a moment to confirm the death-sentence. Hautepierre, as both his friends and enemies well knew, was a gallant gentleman at heart, his airs and languors nothing but the mint-marks of his class in a time when all men took a pose. There were less amiable poses—de la Spina's, el Santo's, and that of his most benevolent Majesty, to exemplify—than that of disclaiming a virtue which one did possess.

"We are all in the hands——" he began, with half a stammer, but the Marquis cut him short.

"Don't be afraid that your knife is too sharp, man," he said good-humouredly. "Fool, if I must needs hear it twice."

"There is no man more reliable than Malot in such a case. Six months, you say, was his last word?"

"And you?"

"Would add 'with care.'"

"And not forgetting el Santo?"

"Oh, eternity!"

A subject congenial to the jest, evidently. De la Spina's half-savage mirth followed Hautepierre down into the narrow street.

To note the young Marquis a few hours later, as he entered the playhouse by the Watergate and exchanged elaborate greetings with his friends, none could have guessed; but a rose-water stoicism was the mode, and Hautepierre was too correct to show such originality as a display of natural feeling. By consent, he was neither quite a talker nor quite a listener, but between the two, as an irresponsible commenter, he affected to be consumed by boredom and dropped epigrams that seldom failed to bite a little. Malot and de la Spina might have their say, but it was not for François Vivian, Marquis d'Hautepierre, to reform his whole scheme of life for so trifling an incident as death.

The play was *The Catalonian Shepherdess,* a forgotten comedy, or only remembered in connection with the appalling holocaust accompanying its production; for on this night, when arcadian sentiments were swaying the rose-water sympathies of the house, and danger, as Hautepierre afterwards plaintively remarked, seemed as remote as real sheep and real shepherdesses, the demoralising cry of "Fire!" suddenly rang out upon a startled

pause. Hard upon the word a tracery of flame showed through the flimsy representation of a sylvan glade, as though the cry had been the cue for its appearance; and at the sight and the sound of its ominous crackle the audience rose and swept back under a single maddened impulse.

There could, from the first moment, be only one ending in such a death-trap to a panic so sudden and complete. Those who escaped, escaped in the three minutes of grace. The perfumed stoicism of the aristocracy and the steady common sense of the bourgeoisie shared a kindred fate, and before each narrow door it was a horrid swarm of frenzied animals, robbed of every resourceful instinct and outside the boundaries even of humanity, that fought murderously for life. Even when the doors could be opened a solid phalanx of dead and living wedged the passage beyond the hope of extrication. Some mercifully lost consciousness and never woke; others, less happy, endured the various forms of madness, and by their excesses lent an added horror to the short and lurid scene.

In all the house there were two persons only who did not join in the wild stampede. From his place Hautepierre watched the earlier part of the wholesale tragedy with emotion indeed but almost in outward calmness. He saw that the situation was desperate, but he already knew that death was very near to him. Despite the pose, during the past few hours he had thought continually of the prospect, and he had come to regard the inevitable at least without despair. Now death took another and a sharper form; that was all.

It was thus that he became aware of the other who had remained. On the stage was a solitary shepherdess, stayed by a very different reason. It had been the part of this one nymph to be bound to a tree until released by

her favourite swain, but at the first alarm the stage was cleared in a twinkling, the faithful shepherd showing a remarkably clean pair of heels as he led the van. A half-circle of increasing fire now surrounded her; hot embers and burning tags of gauze and paper began to fill the air, but it was still possible to reach her, and in a sudden compassion for her pathetic isolation Hautepierre climbed up to the stage and gained her side. So far she had been silent, either through terror or a resolution equal to his own, but seeing him come towards her she cried out piteously.

"Hush, mademoiselle," he said gently, "do not break down, you who have been so brave. I cannot save you, but I will stay with you to the end."

"I cannot die bound," she cried. "Cut this rope with your sword, for the love of heaven."

His sword was useless: one cannot cut silk thread with a needle, and to his unaccustomed fingers the simple knots were formidable, but as he gradually unwound the coils she grew calm again.

"Is there no escape that way, monsieur?" she demanded, indicating the reeking auditorium. "But it was noble of you to come! I do thank you."

"The outlets are all blocked," he replied. "One could not breathe for ten seconds in that air now." It was true: by one of the peculiarities that mark great catastrophes, the burning stage formed the only refuge-ground in the whole theatre, for the volume of smoke, carried high above their heads, lay in a solid bank beyond, where it had already obliterated not only every sign of life but every sound. The shrieks, the prayers and all the pandemonium of terror that had reigned a few short minutes before were smothered down, and nothing punctuated the constant bull-roaring of the flame but the intermittent undernote of crackling wood.

Twice her flimsy garments had caught fire beneath the rain of sparks, but he had crushed it out. He wrapped his cloak around her and led her to the very edge of the stage, but it seemed as though the boards they stood on must burst into flame beneath the scorching breath that licked across them.

"Why did you come to me, monsieur?" she demanded. "You might surely have escaped, perhaps."

"There was no escape," he replied; "and—one does not. You were alone and I thought it might be less to you if you had someone."

"You are very brave and strong. I did not know that men were like that now. Will it be very painful when it comes, monsieur?"

"No," he replied; "we need not suffer that. One must not throw away one's life, but when the moment comes I will carry you down into the smoke beyond, and very soon it will be as though we fell asleep."

"You will hold me in your arms, monsieur? I fear that I may be a coward at the last, but I feel braver near you."

"I will hold you to the end, mademoiselle. Do not fear for yourself; I gather courage from you."

"I thank the kind God for sending you," she said earnestly. "I made my prayers while I was bound. Have you yet prepared, monsieur?"

"I have—thought of things differently," he replied. "You shall pray for me, if you will."

"I shall not cease to do so to the end. Farewell upon earth, dear friend."

The moment of their immolation had arrived. Hautepierre, half-blind and tottering, bent forward, when suddenly the ground opened at his feet. He had a confused thought that the stage was breaking up, but the next moment out of the abyss there rose a face—

scorched, torn, and soiled beyond recognition—while the accompanying voice never ceased or paused from bellowing stentorianly:

"Berthe! Berthe! Art thou here? Call, littlest one, before I go mad! Berthe! Berthe! Art thou here? Where art thou, Berthe, Berthette?"

"Louis!" shrieked Berthe, rushing to the edge of the trap-door. "Hast thou come?"

"Mary!" exclaimed the man with a mighty breath; "throw yourself down, Berthe. Do not hesitate; I catch you. And you too, monsieur, leap if you love life.

"Quickly," continued their rescuer, as he hurried them along. "The roof must fall, and then if we are beneath the stage——" He turned into what appeared to be a passage as he spoke, though to Hautepierre, fresh from the glare above, all was blackness. A rumble ending in a crash sounded behind them. "A near thing!" exclaimed their guide. "Ah, littlest, another minute at my work——"

'But," cried Hautepierre, becoming conscious of an increasing heat and light in spite of his temporary blindness, "are we not approaching the fire again? Is there a safe way out?"

"Not that way," replied Louis, stretching out a shaking hand. "I singed my wings in trying it myself. But it was not for nothing that I played at brigands in these caves a dozen years ago. Gently here, monsieur; we go slowly for a little while and pick our way." He lifted up Berthe as he spoke, and Hautepierre, stumbling across a spade, found that a mass of fresh loose earth and rubble-stone was strewn about the path. "Through here," cried Louis, and seemed to melt away into the wall. The Marquis groped his way through a rough, low aperture and passed into an atmosphere of Stygian dark and noisome damp.

"Faugh!" he exclaimed, "but this drama carries us through sharp contrasts, friend. Where are we now?"

"Among the dead," replied Louis; "and in sight of life once more."

"Ah," said the Marquis, "I remember hearing of these labyrinths from time to time. So yours, my friend, is a love which has indeed broken through the grave!"

"Truly, you may say so in a way, monsieur," he replied. "And there," he continued, as they passed into a larger shaft, "there before us lies the blessed light of day."

. . . . . .

In the interests of science, de la Spina had besought the Marquis to give him facilities for following the course of his disease systematically So clear and well-defined a case was rare, he had said. The profession would be stirred, humanity at large would benefit, and, in short, the young man would be acting selfishly if he kept the good thing to himself. Hautepierre had amiably concurred, and thus it came about that two days later he was again ushered into the physician's room.

Heavy but alert, de la Spina was to-day the iron man of science, the momentary gleam of sentiment or compassion put aside. His greeting was business-like; his preparation to the point; and throwing open his record-book he proceeded to test the characteristic symptoms of the case—to test, and then to re-test, to mutter in his teeth and, fuming, test again.

"I am afraid that you are finding me not up to your expectations," remarked Hautepierre, looking round. "But I can assure you that I feel no worse."

"It is credible, M. le Marquis," replied de la Spina grimly. "And the growing pain here, of which you spoke?"

"Why, to tell the truth, I have not thought of it to-day. In fact, I do not feel it now."

"So one might assume. Then as regards the sense of dying as you started up from sleep?"

"That has not troubled me the last two nights, as I now recall it."

"Not unnaturally."

"But I protest to you, monsieur, that I feel much better on the whole."

"You have every reason to do so."

"In what way?"

"In every way. There is nothing the matter with you!"

"You jest, surely. The positive symptoms——"

"Have all disappeared."

"Why?"

"One cannot say."

"Is it in consequence of anything?"

"I do not know."

"Then I shall not die?"

"Yes—of old age."

"And the worthy Malot?"

"Can only bear me out in every detail."

"But that scourge of humanity, Algerbi el Santo?"

"May go to the father of all his tribe in Hades!" exclaimed de la Spina with great heartiness.

Hampton Hill, 1906.

XIII

The Goose and the Golden Egg

I MET Dunford accidentally at Boulogne. I was struggling home from Chantilly, rather storm-tossed by adverse circumstances, it may be confessed, but imperturbably cheerful through all. Dunford, on the contrary, was depressed. I had struck up acquaintance with the man on the Rugby platform a year before, and had found him a dull, heavy dog; but coming across one another in the Rue Victor Hugo on a wet day we greeted each other cordially.

He had done pretty well on the Westenhanger course, he told me, and then, having nothing better to do, he had crossed on the previous day, and in pursuit of a system had lost on the little horses all that he had won on the big ones. I also have a system, a much better and simpler one than his, and as Dunford still had a few pounds left I proposed that we should go back to the rooms and retrieve his losses. He assented moodily, so we went to the casino and played the game my way, but not entirely my way, for at the very worst possible moments Dunford would introduce variations of his own, with the inevitable consequence that in half-an-hour he was as penniless as I was.

"I wish to Peter that I had never met you," he remarked ill-temperedly as we went out. "I had kept back enough to carry me to Newmarket. What on earth are we going to do now?"

The man was boorish, but I passed it with a glancing jest; after all, it had been his money. As it was still raining, I proposed that we should go to his apartment for the time.

He had a modest room in a cottage on the Boulevard Sainte-Beuve, near at hand. "Even yet," I said, laughing at the conceit, "we are by no means destitute. I have the half of a five-pound note, and logically that is two pounds ten, surely."

"Oh," he said, staring hard at me, "have you half a five-pound note, Sissley?"

"Certainly I have," I replied. "I have carried it about with me for two years."

"That's very strange, because, as a matter of fact, I happen to have half a five-pound note also."

I don't think that I was ever more surprised in my life, although it was only a simple coincidence after all.

"Which end is yours?" demanded Dunford as he hunted through his pocket-book.

"The signature," I replied, producing it. "And yours?"

His was the other end and we laid it down on the table beside mine. Really, they went very well together, although the numbers differed, of course, and the dates. His was for the 3rd of June, 1905, and mine for the 5th of June, 1903; it was scarcely noticeable.

Half mechanically, I took out a pocket-knife, and, placing the two halves together—as it happened they overlapped in the lettering—I began to cut them down to make a perfect whole. It was merely the pastime of an idle moment, I assure you.

"How did you get yours?" I asked carelessly.

"There was a rogue of a fellow that I wouldn't trust with a cracked shilling," he explained. "He must have something on account, he said, so I gave him the other

half of this as a guarantee. Well, he didn't earn it, so I kept the second half, see? How did you get yours?"

There was no reason at all why I should not tell him.

"I obtained some valuable information for a degraded creature some time ago," I replied. "Affecting to profess gratitude, he asked me as a personal favour to accept the trifling gift of a five-pound note, but on second thoughts he decided to keep half of it until he had verified the facts. In the end he became undignified, and burned the second half before my face."

Dunford laughed outrageously. The good humour of a boor is always trying.

"What have you made of it?" he said, when he had finished.

I had trimmed the edges until they fitted perfectly. A strip of stamp paper completed the work.

"It is nothing but a joke," I said, tossing it across to him, "but if one were among friends who could appreciate the jest, it might serve as a means for much harmless pleasantry."

"Oh, it's nothing but a joke, of course," he said, examining it; "but, really, I think that the joke might pass, Sissley."

I deprecated the suggestion with a waggish finger.

"Consider, Dunford," I said warningly. "We are in a foreign land where Bank of England notes, although reverenced by the natives almost as much as English gold, are comparatively uncommon objects of the seashore, and are, therefore, submitted to a closer scrutiny than they would be at home."

"Let the jockey ride the horse, my lad," he replied pompously. "Are you going to change it, or am I?"

I gave him the honour gracefully.

"You have the presence, Dunford," I admitted, "and that particular variety of fatness that never fails to

carry to the public mind the suggestion of prosperity. At the moment you look in every way more of a five-pound note than I do. It must be you."

"Very well," he grunted. "Let me; that's all."

"But not here," I suggested. "Don't send out for change. Let it be to-morrow, in the ordinary way of making a purchase somewhere. That's half the business."

He nodded. "I'll tell you what, Sissley," he said. "I'll try a money bureau. Right in the glare of the limelight, my boy! What if it doesn't come off? I've been had with a wrong 'un, that's all."

I came nearer admiring him then than ever before—or since.

"Excellent!" I cried. "That stamps it as a merry jest throughout."

"Well, you and your wit can have the armchair for the night," he said, half-grudgingly. Had I been host, my guest should have had the bed; but such was the man.

The next morning Dunford went out after breakfast, and in less than half-an-hour returned with six gold pieces, three francs and a half, and the admission that he had expended the other two francs in a small bottle of Bass.

"It's too easy, my son," he said, swelling with self-consequence. "Always put your money with the Old Firm. Who gave Yellow Rambler at a thousand to eight for the Warlaytree Plate? We are the people. Coming out?"

"Presently," I said, "presently; but, in the meantime, I should like a few minutes of your serious attention. While you have been out—drinking beer, Dunford—I have been thinking."

"Let it go at that," he retorted. "Yes; while I have

been out doing the work, you have been snoozing in the easy-chair."

"You scintillate to-day, positively," I laughed. "Well, touching your adventure—what sort of a place did you get to?"

He looked at me out of his pale eyes with dull curiosity.

"An ordinary money-changer's shop," he replied. "The fellow is a German. I saw him make sure that the secret marks were right—'secret marks,' my Peter, when every little josser on an office-stool knows 'em!—and he thumbed the top right corner with guileless faith. What about it?"

"Did you ever hear of a certain goose, Dunford?" I asked airily—"a certain goose Dunford?"

I emphasised the point, for it was frequently my humour to hold up the heavy, unsuspecting man to the shafts of my derision solely for my own inward amusement.

"What goose?" he demanded, half inclined to be angry without knowing exactly why.

"It laid a golden egg," I replied. "Until its owner short-sightedly killed it. If you had a goose that laid a golden egg, would you kill it, Dunford?"

"Don't talk rot!" he said irritably.

I laughed good-humouredly. He was obviously uneasy at not being able to follow the delicate play of my mind, but I said no more.

I waited for a few hours, and then, leaving Dunford with an excuse, I sought out his German friend. He had a little shop just off the tram route, and, after the manner of his kind, he displayed his stock-in-trade behind his well-protected window. There I saw our note, and saw also that it was the only one of its sort.

There is a great deal in the air of approach before a

word is spoken. I entered the shop as a typical holiday-making Briton; I neared the counter with the smile of a friend; and I am sure that my greeting conveyed to the attending Teuton the suggestion of a benevolent interest in his welfare. Then I informed him that I required a five-pound note; and having only the sum of fifty-three francs in my possession I made some discreet demonstration with it.

The elderly German reached out his note and placed it before me, while I passed the time with gay badinage on the subject of the profits of money-changing and usury at large. I also told him a funny story about a countess and a runaway flying-machine, and generally established myself on genial terms with him. Then I began to count out my francs.

At forty-eight the smile faded from my face, and a startled, even pained, look took its place. Mechanically I counted out three more francs—stopped—then swept the lot back into my pocket. I flatter myself that it was delicately led up to—first, an almost imperceptible arrest of the bubbling gaiety of expression, a half-incredulous doubt; then a swift, hawk-like glance into his face; another sharp examination of the note, here, there; and with grieved conviction I straightened myself up and pushed the note away.

But I had no intention of becoming unapproachable. Well, were we not both men of the world? The attempt—if attempt it had been, and not mere accident—had failed. I had been too sharp, and I was not a penny the worse off. Gradually my good-humour returned. I smiled—I smiled roguishly, and shook my head sagely from side to side in amiable reproof.

"Oh, no, my friend," I said mildly; "not to-day. Oh, by no means to-day with Mr. Walker, of London!"

I fear that much of the subtle range of emotion was

wasted upon the German, who was a dull, heavy man, something like Dunford; so like, indeed, that I marvelled afterwards how the one could impose upon the other.

"What is the madder with it?" he said blankly. "It is a goot node, is it not? Yes, yes, it is goot."

"Oh, it is good enough logically," I admitted; "but not commercially. It is composed of two good halves, but the whole is not good."

"There is no hole," he protested earnestly. "See, it is in its entirety gomposed of two portions adhesively together emplanked, which is permissible. Yes, it is a goot node."

I smiled knowingly and pointed first at one number and date, then at the other. By word and expression I sought to convey the information that I was astute—but not unsympathetic.

"They goincide dissimilarly!" he exclaimed, sitting down helplessly. "Then I have been in-taken!"

"Oh, not necessarily," I said. "Possibly it was a genuine mistake. But it would never do for a man in *your* position to pass it off and then have it traced back to you."

"It is a thing ingomprehensible," he moaned. "Who ever heard of a node of two goot dissimilar portions gomposed?"

"Oh, for that matter I have had one myself," I said reminiscently; "and after the infernal trouble I had before I could get anything from the Bank for it, I shall not forget it in a hurry."

"Ach, then it is remediable?" he asked, brightening up a little.

"Well, you may call it a remedy," I said with a laugh, offering him a cigar and lighting one myself, "but as a matter of fact it's more like an amputation. It took me

a month to find it out, and cost about half the value in fees. You have to advertise the facts, giving the two numbers and dates, once a week for three weeks in the *Times,* the *Gazette,* and—er—the *Pink One.* After that you can attend before the Lord Mayor of London and make a declaration, which has then to be taken to Doctors' Commons to be sworn, and to Somerset House to be stamped."

"Any common doctor can swear?" he asked hopefully.

"Possibly, but not in this case," I replied. "It is the King's Proctor, really."

"I have seen of him in the records," he remarked intelligently. "He interferes."

"I have known people who made the same complaint," I admitted. "All this, you understand, has to be done in person; no agents or intermediaries are allowed. Then you are summoned to attend before a meeting of the directors of the Bank of England, and, after you have produced two householders of the City who enter into bonds that they will be responsible for the money being returned if it has been wrongfully claimed, you receive the amount, less twenty per cent. deduction, in the form of a Treasury Bill payable three months after date upon personal application at the Board of Works. Our English methods are rather elaborate, I suppose, but the authorities are thoroughly safeguarded by the process."

The elderly person groaned in German and sat down and got up again three times.

"Mine frient," he said at length, "you are returning to London yourself in short?"

"Yes; 'Back to the old log cabin once again,' I suppose," I hummed airily.

"Log gabin?" he repeated helplessly; "ach! by steambode, to be sure. Well, you are what you call familiar

with the rope. You shall haf this really goot though of two dissimilar halves gomposed node sheep. You shall haf him, yes, for sixty-five francs."

I smiled; I laughed quietly; I shook my head and hemmed and hawed. I was unwilling; I was not really interested. For I saw that the thing was practically done, and my part of the haggling could be carried out in the highest-minded manner possible. The German advanced my unique knowledge of the procedure, the commercial stagnation of Boulogne, and his own passionate love of the Fatherland. I replied with the inviolable dignity of London business life, Tariff Reform, and the uncertainty of human affairs. We met at forty-two francs, seventy-five.

I pass over Dunford's exclamation when I laid the note before him. It would convey little to the reader, as it would of necessity consist almost entirely of a line of dashes ending with a note of interrogation.

"This, Dunford," I said, dealing with the interrogation, "this is the goose that lays the golden egg—or else the golden egg that our goose has laid us. I purchased it from a poor German merchant who had been grossly imposed upon, and its selling price seems to be about one pound, fourteen shillings."

"Sissley," said Dunford fatly, "I'll take it all back, whatever I have said. I never thought much of you before——"

"But it's a joke," I insisted. "A mad, merry midsummer freak. I positively decline to regard it in any other light than that of a jest. See, I have put down the elderly German's address in my pocket-book. In the course of time other addresses may be added, but to whatever length the list extends I shall certainly send to each the balance and explain our whimsical frolic, at a convenient season."

"—or since," concluded Dunford, eyeing the book with great disfavour.

We left Boulogne the next morning and moved on to Etaples, where the redemption price rose to thirty-seven shillings and sixpence, which Dunford said was too much; but at Abbeville it fell to one pound twelve. Turning back to the coast, we continued our sentimental journey through quaint old Normandy with no thought for the morrow. Each day, each new place brought its little contribution, and I may state that from Cape Griz Nez to Cherbourg the average value set upon a Bank of England five-pound note, "of two dissimilar halves gombosed," is one pound eleven shillings, and ninepence. On the coast it is slightly above that figure, inland proportionately below: an interesting fact for which I am quite unable to offer any explanation.

In our leisure—and business did not occupy more than two half-hours each day—I took Dunford to cathedrals and picture galleries, pointed out the historic associations of each place, and strove, though unsuccessfully, I fear, to awaken an interest towards the romantic and the beautiful in the gross man's breast. In return, he took me to music-halls of the lower kind and to gambling dens. Yet he was capable in his department. He acquired a wonderful insight into the characters of money-changers, and rarely made a mistake. Englishmen and Americans he passed over, merely changing a piece of money with them, and if a Greek came forward he left the office at once without even that formality. Still, we had our rebuffs—who has not, when life is full of them? Twice the discrepancy was detected and Dunford had to extricate himself as feasibly as he could. At Dieppe a rude person made offensive remarks towards myself, which left me no alternative but to withdraw; at Rouen an ignorant oaf maintained to the end that the two halves

of a Bank of England note always varied in number and date, "to make fraud more difficult"; while at Caen the note had already been passed out again. But by the time we reached Rouen we were in funds, and procuring two fresh notes we replenished our supply of golden geese.

Like all other pleasant things in life this simple idyllic existence, with its absence of sordid cares, its free, healthy occupation, and its assured ten pounds a week each, came to an end all too soon. It happened suddenly, and, I need hardly say, unexpectedly, at Rennes. Dunford had carried out his part of the business and retired. In the lightest-hearted manner possible I had followed him up, and with gay sallies and ingratiating address had depreciated the note to thirty-eight shillings, when an offensive-looking agent of the law rose from his lair behind the counter, and at the same moment a grotesque personage wearing a sword appeared in the doorway.

It is not necessary to go into the fullest details. Dunford, of course, like a craven traitor, fled at once, and I had the greatest possible difficulty in procuring the services of an advocate. I addressed myself to the representative of my native country, asking him to explain to the French authorities that if they persisted in their ludicrous mistake they would become contemptible in the eyes of the world, and requesting him to interest himself for my immediate release. His reply was to the effect that he was not interested. My lawyer advised me to abandon the plea that the transactions were a huge jest from beginning to end.

"But there is no other explanation of my innocence," I cried.

"That is true," he replied, "but you will get off rather lighter without it."

"The note-book," I reminded him; "it bears witness of my intention."

"It is being used as evidence against you. The suggestion is that you kept a list to avoid going to the same place twice."

I fell back speechless at the malignity of fate and the ingenuity of man. Even my irrepressible fount of gaiety was almost quenched.

In the end, a ridiculously got-up official, after some farcical proceedings, sentenced me to six months' incarceration in an unwholesome den. I have just finished this period, but I positively decline to consider that the whole burlesque travesty leaves the slightest reflection upon my character.

Hampton Hill, 1905.

XIV

The Making of Marianna

THE Bartletts led a nomadic existence within that radius of Charing Cross that business requirements imposed upon Mr. Bartlett. As a result the Dead Letter Office dealt with no inconsiderable portion of their correspondence and comparatively intimate friends had been known to address them through the "Personal" column of the daily press.

It now being July they had taken up their quarters in a furnished cottage at Sunbury, migrating thither from Hampstead apartments, themselves the successors of a bijou flat in Chelsea, to which they had moved from a Bayswater boarding-house, after spending Christmas at a Brighton hotel.

"The system has its advantages," Mrs. Bartlett would admit to her friends, "but I should not advise you to give up your pretty houses to try it. Why? Oh, well, during the nine years that we have been married I have had the experience of twenty-seven different servants. I was tempted to make a list of them the other day. Twenty-seven, my dears!"

"In any case that is the nuisance nowadays," one of the friends replied. "But what a red-cheeked, pleasant-looking country girl you have now. She did not come to you with the recommendation of County Council School 'accomplishments,' I should imagine?"

"Indeed no," agreed Mrs. Bartlett.

"Norfolk?" suggested the friend.

"No. From a place—a place on the river."

"Not about here, though?" persisted the lady. "One might as well be on Juan Fernandez for any chance of hearing of a girl locally. If they don't go into town their ambition centres on Richmond—the Terrace, you know," with a shrug and a glance.

"No, some distance from here," replied Mrs. Bartlett briefly. "Do you care for croquet?"

It was possible to be discouraging towards the casual friend, but that same evening Mrs. Bartlett's brother, who was staying at the cottage, leaned across the table and with an elaborate affectation of the late visitor's manner, remarked tentatively:

"Let me see: where did you say she came from, dear?"

"I did not say," replied the lady with a laugh. "But is is called Tidal Basin, if you wish to know, Flip."

"Good," remarked Philip with an air of appreciation. "This sister of mine improves since she moved into your family, Tom. 'A place on the river'; 'Some distance from here'—true; but what about the County Council School, She-bee?"

" 'Accomplishments,' " corrected Phœbe. "She came with no accomplishments. Surely a week has shown you that."

"Accomplishments!" said Tom, looking up from his book. "Do you know, Philip, we actually saw an advertisement in one of the papers recently, 'General servant would like to meet accomplished Frenchman in evenings for mutual improvement in scientific conversation.' "

"Yes, dear," interposed Phœbe. "Only unfortunately for the instance the advertisement was repeated and the first two words then appeared as 'German savant.' "

"Worse things happen in Fleet Street," said Philip. "But I don't know about your Gwendolin Maud having

no accomplishments. She came out into the garden the other day and entertained me for half-an-hour with light and elegant conversation."

Mrs. Bartlett gave that ceiling-ward glance that is symbolic of resignation.

"Her irrepressible friendliness is beyond everything," she declared. "When anyone calls I really come down in a cold terror, always imagining that I may find her sitting in the drawing-room with them. What did she say?"

"She asked me what time I thought it was, and when I was taking out my watch she said quickly, 'Oh no; I know, but I want you to guess.' "

"You only laugh, Tom," exclaimed his wife indignantly, which was true enough, "but it really is quite too frightful."

"I guessed," continued Philip, displaying an obvious sympathy towards Tom's standpoint, "and was some half-hour wrong. 'Yes,' said Euphrosyne brightly, 'I thought that it was about that time too. Isn't it coming dark soon?' "

"She saunters down the garden when Tom is doing anything, and asks him the names of things," said Phœbe dolefully. "He won't tell her to go away, and I—I——"

"You won't either," retorted Tom. "You are afraid of hurting her feelings."

"I confess that I don't quite know how to bring her to see matters properly sometimes. You see, Flip, she is not an ordinary trained girl, and I feel that I ought to make allowances and not expect too much at first. She's an Unemployed, and a Problem, and a Submerged Tenth, and so on. But don't let my thoughtless prattle keep you from going to sleep, Flip!"

"Passionately interested," yawned Philip. "Your beautiful, fresh, country air. Do go on."

"Tom, did you *ever* know him interested in any mortal thing from an entomological specimen to a murder case?"

"Ought to have been a Buddhist monk," murmured Tom.

"It's the privilege of a weak heart," said Philip placidly. "I have to lounge through life, physically and emotionally, by doctors' orders. Yes, you were explaining why your Matilda Grace does her hair differently at least three times a day when she has so little of it to do."

"You have seen that! I never knew that you noticed anything," exclaimed his sister.

"A general delusion: hence my opportunities for noticing," replied Philip.

"I had her through Mrs. Barton," continued Phœbe, ignoring the side issue. "She has a 'Settlement' in the East End, you know, and does a frightful lot of good there among the most extraordinary girls, I should imagine. They encourage them to go into service instead of into mills and workshops. Mrs. Barton heard that we were taking this cottage for a few months and wrote begging me to try one of her girls. She said that she had some quite presentable-looking, and that one by herself in a very small house in the country would have a good chance of doing well. So I went to look at them."

"Like going to the Dogs' Home, your registry offices, aren't they?" said Philip. "They all sit round, don't they, and you go in and have the little animals you fancy brought out and put through their tricks."

"I think it has come to the mistresses being the little animals and sitting round waiting for the servants to come and have them, to hear them talk," suggested Mr. Bartlett.

"Well, I was really quite tired of going to ordinary registry offices, and of having anæmic girls sent up

from the country who looked as if they had worked in a Shoreditch cellar all their lives. Mrs. Barton said that hers were mostly rough girls who had had no domestic training and had no clothes. And they all sat round, as Philip says."

"Only even more so than he imagined, it seems," said that gentleman.

"Uncommonly like an Eastern slave market—Royal Academy style," remarked Tom.

"They had no proper clothes," continued Mrs. Bartlett distantly, "so they could not go to registry offices or reply to advertisements. When they get a place the 'Settlement' gives them caps and aprons and a few things, and you find them the rest."

"Good business," commented Tom.

"Out of their wages, of course."

"Poor worms," murmured Philip.

"I really liked Marianna's face from the first, although her get-up was quite frightful. She had very dilapidated boots—her father's, I learned—an old torn straw hat, and all her things like that. Her hair was half-way between long and short and looked—well——"

"Quite frightful?" suggested Philip politely.

"Well, like a row of drowned rats' tails. Of course I expected her to refer to 'lydies' and 'blokes,' and to say 'Strike me pink!' and 'Garn!' and I was awfully surprised to find that she spoke quite nicely. When I was talking to her it came out by accident that she had not had anything to eat since breakfast on the day before. In a great state I said, 'Oh, why ever didn't you tell Mrs. Barton?' and off I rushed to find her. Imagine me when she took it quite as a matter of course and said that probably most of the girls had not had anything to eat since breakfast on the day before! I went out there and then and bought Marianna a bagful of buns, and she was

awfully elegant about it and wouldn't think of touching them while I was there. She said it would seem strange eating without a plate. And all the time she was the most draggle-tailed, starving little scarecrow imaginable."

"Wish she would have the same scruples about my Golden Pippins," said Mr. Bartlett. "She sits under the tree scrunching them up by the dozen."

"I think that was partly your own fault, dear," said his wife. "If you remember, you asked her if she liked apples. I am sure that she took it as a sort of general invitation."

"She may have taken it as a general invitation, but when I came across her helping herself and said it, I meant it as a sort of specific prohibition."

"Yes," soliloquised Philip, "I have heard that children, savage tribes, the mentally deficient, and most women require their sarcasm underlined with a club to catch the drift properly. Possibly your Marianna comes within one or more of these categories."

"Oh, then she had a reference," exclaimed Mrs. Bartlett, reverting to the East End. "I wondered who on earth could have employed a little ragamuffin like that, but I thought that I had better see her. Marianna showed me the way; it was like going through the Ghetto or the Jago or the Bowery or some of those dreadful places one reads about. The house we went to was in Cement Street—a Mrs. Plack. She told me that Marianna's father and mother and sisters and brothers had all lodged in two of her rooms for a long time till they got so much in debt for their rent that she had to send them away. Then they went into one room somewhere else, and Mrs. Plack let Marianna stay with her because she did not like to go into the one room. She helped with things about the house, and Mrs. Plack said that

she was a very nice willing girl, and she would have liked to keep her herself only her husband, who had something to do with ships, had been out of work for six months and was ill in bed with sciatica, so that they could not afford it. She told me all about herself and called her five children in for me to see. They stood in a row and all recited little pieces that they had learned at school, all except one who was deaf and dumb, and he showed me a castle and cliffs that he had made out of bits of broken oyster-shells. It was all most frightfully interesting and I gave them threepenny-bits each, and they seemed so pleased and showed each other their threepenny-bits all round, though of course they were all alike. Mrs. Plack said that Cement Street was a very nice street for those parts, and, although they were rather unfortunate just then, that she was much better off than most of the people around because she had rich relations—a brother, I think, who kept a public-house. Before I left she showed me three electro-plated serviette rings which she kept in a cupboard to be ready when her rich relations came to see her. She had been married fourteen years and they had not been yet, but, she said, it was a satisfaction to have things nice in case they ever did come."

It was some twenty-four hours later that the doings of Marianna again moved Mrs. Bartlett's utterance, but this time in a different key.

"It is perfectly too bad," she exclaimed, coming into the little drawing-room where her husband was reading. "I have just been into Marianna's room to see that she was keeping it tidy, and I find that she has scribbled all over the wall with match-ends and pencils. You know, Tom, it is a pretty, light blue distemper and you can guess what it is like now. And here is a nice book that I lent her to read: she has had the—well, it isn't really impertinence because she simply doesn't know any

better, but on a blank page she has actually drawn a drunken sailor trying to dance the hornpipe. That, of all things, in *The Pleasures of Life!"*

"Another Marianna evening?" said Philip with pleasant resignation, coming in to hear the burden of his sister's woe. "May I see the effort?"

Mr. Bartlett handed him the book without any comment. He was smiling, but on the whole he looked much more puzzled than amused. The drawing was that of a single figure: as Mrs. Bartlett had said, that of a drunken sailor trying to dance a hornpipe, and it produced this simple effect—that as one looked one seemed to see not a drawing but a drunken sailor trying to dance the hornpipe. Philip glanced and looked again. He was smiling when he took the book: he still smiled and laughed quietly at the humour of it, but behind it all, in face and attitude, there seemed to be the arrest of intense surprise. He put down his cigarette somewhere unconsciously—upon the rosewood piano, as it chanced, but people who let their houses furnished are not supposed to mind trifles such as that—with his eyes still fixed upon the page.

"Well?" demanded Mr. Bartlett at length. He seemed to be expecting something.

"Don't you think it is funny, Flip?" asked his sister. "I thought it rather good in its way; but frightfully rough, of course."

"I think that one might safely go to the length of labelling it funny," replied Philip, looking gravely from face to face, "and even admitting it to be rather good—in its way, as you say. Now do you think, Phœbe, that we might penetrate into the maiden's chaste retreat to see to what extent she has damaged the elegant blue groundwork of her bower?"

"Oh, yes," said Phœbe, leading the way. "But why

have you two become so serious all at once? I don't really mind about the book, and I daresay that nothing will be said about the room."

"I doubt it," declared Philip judicially. "I shouldn't wonder if that room doesn't lead to quite a lot of talk before you hear the last of it. As for the book, I don't mind taking it off your hands at the published price myself."

"Well," remarked Mrs. Bartlett somewhat impatiently, when they had returned to the drawing-room, "aren't you going to say something, Flip? You have succeeded in making me curious, and to see you sitting there, smiling at a paper-knife, doesn't convey a great deal."

"My dear child," replied Philip, still playing with the paper-knife, "I am considering the kindest way to break it to you gently. The fact is, that as a maid-servant I fear your Marianna will turn out to be something of a white elephant."

"She is that already, in many things—dusting china, for instance," admitted the lady candidly. "But do you mean to say that the things she does are *really* good?"

"They are really good," said Philip deliberately. "They are so marvellously, strikingly, incomprehensively good that if I had not to repress any symptoms of enthusiasm by the doctor's orders I should have to get up and walk about the room while I talked of them."

"Does he know anything at all about it, Tom?" demanded Phœbe.

"I have heard him described as one of the best judges of black-and-white work in London," replied Tom.

"I suppose I don't understand it then," she said. "But none of the things seem at all pretty to me, and they are so unfinished."

Philip smiled broadly. "Well, don't complain," he

said. "You get plenty of the sort of art you like. Leave us our few Mariannas."

"I don't quite see how it is going to turn out, though," remarked Phœbe thoughtfully. "Of course it is a great honour to have a genius for a general servant, and to have 'discovered' her ought to be frightfully exciting and all that. And I don't mind losing her much, because scrubbing floors is the only work that she can do really well; and who wants to have the floors scrubbed in someone else's house? But—well, you know what she is like. How will she go about it?"

"Oh, for that matter, wasn't Millie Myers fiddling at pit-doors a few years ago, and Ben Corvelli singing as he blacked the boots at a Bournemouth hotel?" interposed Mr. Bartlett.

"But I don't believe that Marianna has a scrap of ambition for anything," declared her mistress. "If you start with the idea of unbounded enthusiasm and heroic purpose on her part you are probably laying up for yourself quite a store of shocks and surprises. Mark my words and remember your poor heart, Flip."

Philip looked at his sister with deep but half-amused interest.

"I am wondering how you will rise to the occasion, She-bee," he said presently. "You have a fascinating experiment before you. Here is a ragattee little creature with probably the heart of a coster, a mind like a new slate, and inspired fingers. You have the chance of a lifetime—a lifetime! of ten thousand lifetimes, I should say. It's quite the sort of thing you read about."

"I am quite content to let it remain the sort of thing I read about, as far as I am concerned," retorted Mrs. Bartlett. "What have I to do with it?"

"You? You have everything to do with it. You, and you alone, can become Marianna's kind patroness. You

—unobtrusively assisted by Tom and myself—can take her firmly and sympathetically in hand and educate her on her weak points."

"Oh, great goodness!" exclaimed the lady, aghast; "spare us, Flip! I know a great deal more about Marianna's weak points than you do, or are ever likely to. Send her to school, or to Paris, or to Rome, if you like, but remember that if you have got a heart I have got nerves."

"Not a bit of good," said Philip inexorably. "You know perfectly well that she could not yet mix with educated people who were strangers. This is probably the one chance of her lifetime also. If she leaves you she is extinguished. You hold the balance of her destiny whether you like it or not."

"I don't like it," she declared. "I am frightfully good-natured, I know, but I do think that it is expecting too much. I once knew a sort of amateur lady artist, and one used to meet droves of long hairy things there who talked about nothing but 'wash,' and 'tone,' and 'value,' and seemed more or less deficient in all three. Why can't Marianna sell her drawings if they are so wonderful and then make a nice home for her father and mother and disappear from our immediate horizon in a burst of splendour?"

"Just because she could not do it," he replied; "any more than you could engineer a 'corner' in Peruvian bark, for instance. Then she ought to study hard for at least two years before she 'comes out,' so to speak. She has had no more experience than a door-knocker. Everything she draws has passed down Cement Street. Now she needs taking out to see other kinds of things."

"I think it would be simpler to adopt her straight off," said Phœbe scornfully.

"I daresay that it would be a paying speculation, and it would certainly immortalise you."

"I should think myself fortunate if it did not imbecilise me. . . . Do you *really* want me to educate her, Fillipino, dear?"

"I had visions," confessed Philip, "but I would rather that she was walled up in Cement Street for ever than have you worried."

"Don't be bullied into it by that tone of voice," warned her husband. "Sleep on it, at any rate."

"No, I'll play on it," she declared. "Go into the garden, please."

For half-an-hour "The Girl in the Chocolate Box" and "Hi, there!" fought tinkling melodies in her soul in turn with Weber and Beethoven, while her husband methodically pruned his tomato plants and repeatedly urged his brother-in-law to take up the study of aphides or diptera. Then, in the fading light, Philip suddenly forgot to pace the walks; the hilarious voices of two lovers in the road beyond sank to a whisper, then ceased; Bartlett no longer pruned. . . .

"So!" he exclaimed half-crossly, closing his knife and turning his steps towards the house as the subdued pæan died away. "You have got it your own way again, of course."

Very easy times succeeded for Marianna. Phœbe, who detested "daily women," got in a daily woman and Marianna's duties lightened and imperceptibly changed. It was easy to requisition her services to carry wraps; she was useful to take shopping; it was inevitable that she should wear prettier things. Marianna saw a great deal of the river that season; she witnessed a royal wedding at Windsor, a military funeral at Guildford, and a day's racing at Esher; she put in an appearance at an occasional flower-show and cricket-match, and she began

to know something of the landmarks of the West End. To engage her leisure afternoons and evenings a lavish supply of the finest drawing materials waited at her elbow, while it became a general thing that *Punch,* the art journals, several American magazines and a few English ones were to be found on the kitchen dresser. The daily woman, the recipient of Marianna's confidences, thought it rather remarkable, but reflected that the proceedings ("goings-on," in daily womanese) at furnished cottages here and there during the river season lay outside the reasonable explanation of daily women. To Marianna it did not seem in any way strange; she accepted it as she had accepted semi-starvation and an occasional thrashing in Canning Town, as part of the ordinary routine of the situation; quite dog-like.

"I used to read from *Reynold's* to my father sometimes on Sundays," she had once told Mrs. Bartlett; "and whenever I came to a word that I didn't understand or couldn't pronounce I had to 'Ahem!' instead." There was a great deal of "Ahem!" taking place in Marianna's experience during this period.

Philip was not altogether satisfied. The ladies and gentlemen of the artist's pencil were not the strong, frank creatures of her earlier efforts. She did not understand them and she could not interpret what she saw. In a time of fatness and ease the vividness of impression was dulled; possibly the emotions, or their expression, were more restrained in her new models. In turning over her earlier sketches Philip had been struck by a wild figure—a Chinaman rushing headlong down a gloomy slum, a drawn knife in his hand and frenzied, murderous passion in his eyes. Marianna explained it. "It was the first time I ever saw one of those," she said. "I was with another girl in the Dock Road when a lot of

them came by. 'They're all stone deaf,' said the other girl, 'through firing big guns. That's why they all wear ropes down their backs; you pull it when you want to stop one instead of calling out to him, because that's no good. You try one and see. Go on; he'll only grin and shake hands with you; they're all like that.' I didn't know, of course, that it was a sort of game that was going then —to get you to do it—until all the Chinks about the Tidal Basin were nearly bar—I mean were frightfully wild, so I pulled the pigtail of the nearest one pretty hard. The other girl was gone like a flash and when the man jumped round at me with an awful yell I nearly tumbled backwards among the stalls there. I crawled through, but I saw him coming after me, so I flew. I went up one street and down another, and then hearing him getting nearer I dodged into a archway. He thought I was on in front and passed me—like that. I always remembered him." The simple, vigorous studies which adorned her wall, framed in a maze of futile pencillings and inchoate attempts to realise some half-grasped idea, were generally "like that"—memories sharply stencilled by hunger, pain or fear. As Philip had said, everything she drew had passed along Cement Street. Her women, her grim, slatternly, unpleasant, lippy, wisp-haired, real-looking women, hung round its doorposts; her children rolled in its gutters or swung behind its dust-carts; her men—well, she was not imaginative and so her men were either in the act of working or the act of drinking. Phœbe picked out an exception—a long-stretching queue of dejection marshalled at the foot of a tall blank wall. "That?" replied Marianna. "Oh, that's only the men waiting for work at the docks. My father often stood there all day last winter. I used to take him his dinner —when there happened to be any—so that he should not lose his place. That's him, the third from this end."

Phœbe turned away with a slight shudder. The "third from this end" in the grip of a hard winter when work was scarce did not present an attractive face.

Towards the middle of September, in the ordinary routine of their migratory habits, the Bartletts turned their thoughts towards more urban quarters. Marianna would probably be bound to be in the way; possibly very much in the way; in scarcely any contingency useful. Phœbe, however, was pledged to a policy of "frightful good-nature," and as this vapidly-expressed quality covered a sublimer heroism (after the manner of people who in self-defence wear something imitation on their sleeves) than the little slum-hearted gamin could ever rise to the height of conceiving, the immediate future was not a matter for any concern on Marianna's part. Nevertheless, she it was who, at this period, airily and light-heartedly sprang a mine one morning that sent Phœbe flying to the wire in despair, to send a message which involved Philip in no slight perplexity. "Everyone all right," she wailed from Sunbury to Strand West, "but do come if you possibly conveniently can;" and Philip came.

"It's Marianna," said Phœbe, taking up her wail at closer range. "I knew how frightfully disappointed you would be. She wants to leave."

"Leave!" he exclaimed blankly. "Leave here? Leave——?" The possibility had never occurred to him.

"She wants," continued Phœbe, with slow horror, "*to—go—into—a—laundry*—at Acton!"

"Go into a laundry! God in heaven! she's mad. Marianna," he cried, striding into the kitchen, "why is this?"

Marianna stood by the table, engaged, after the manner of her kind in moments of embarrassment, with a

tightly-rolled handkerchief. She looked distinctly mulish, nor, to drive home the comparison, would she speak.

"She won't answer you," interpreted Phœbe. "She has become sullen. She has made friends with a girl whom she met at Hampton Court and she wants to go to the laundry to be with her."

"And the friend's brother?" suggested Philip with intuition. "Is he also to be found at the laundry?"

Marianna shot a rapid glance and licked her lips.

"There is a brother," admitted Phœbe. "Possibly."

"But her art—her future—her career!"

"She does not think that there is anything much in drawing. And in the laundry she will be able to do more as she wants, wear what she likes, and go about the streets with her own friends. You see, she is growing up."

"If she had stayed she would have been making hundreds, if not tens of hundreds, a few years hence."

"She does not understand hundreds and tens of hundreds. They convey nothing to her mind. All she wants is money to buy apples and purple dresses with, from day to day and week to week. . . . And she informs me that she will get better wages there than I am paying her here."

"When does she want to go?"

"To-morrow, she says. Of course she could be kept for a month really, but she knows nothing about giving proper notice."

"Very well," replied Philip dispassionately; "then I should let her go to-morrow."

She went the next day—to the laundry at Acton. She became very sunny and pleasant when she understood that she would be allowed to go, and in return nobody thought it worth while to underline sentiments less ami-

able. The same day Philip burned a portfolio of sketches. Excellent as they were, he felt that it is necessary to be ordinarily human at times, and at least a generation must elapse before one can entirely dis-associate the art from the artist.

"I should certainly take up aphides, if I were you," remarked Mr. Bartlett on his return.

Hampton Hill, 1905.

XV

Bobbie and Poetic Justice

THEY arrived by the 6.15 train as Henry had suggested—my brother Henry and his youngest son. "Suggested" struck me as being a rather inappropriate word to use for a visit at a bare day's notice, and the conventional phrase "if quite convenient to you" has a tinge of gratuitous insincerity when the letter containing it is delivered seven minutes after their train has left Paddington. But that is Henry all over. As a boy he was always anxious to share his broken toys with me and to assume an equal interest in the contents of my much better kept play-box. At school he was ready to take my part through thick and thin, but in return he seemed to expect me to throw myself unquestioningly on his side. On several occasions I plainly recognised that he was in the wrong, and I had to tell him so.

"I cannot conscientiously stick up for you in this," I would say; "but I shall not actively oppose you, because you are my brother."

There were periods of coldness between us, but no quarrels.

"Oh, all right, don't excite yourself about that; I can't help being your brother," was his usual retort; but once, I remember, the boy whose conduct I was actually approving took Henry's arm and walked off with him, throwing the word "Sneak!" over his shoulder. When, later in life, I came to my brother's assistance to the extent of five hundred pounds, at a rate of interest that was

perfectly nominal in comparison with the risk involved, he never showed—I don't want to misjudge him, but I certainly never observed—by the subtlest shade of deference that the action had struck him as in any way magnanimous.

I do not ignore the fact that it was chiefly through his information and advice in the matter of the Great Glory Reefs that I am now able to devote myself entirely to my private pursuits, but if a balance of our whole lives was taken, I think it would be found that Henry has come off very well indeed, and although I should hesitate to call him ungrateful, he certainly appears to take a good deal as a matter of course.

"I knew that you wouldn't mind rather short notice, old chap," he said at dinner (his extreme heartiness and display of fraternal affection are becoming rather trying at our ages); "and, as far as that goes, I did not know myself before yesterday. Now, how long do you think that I can stay?"

"The week-end at the least," I replied, with as near an approach to his own geniality as I could summon up. "Perhaps even a whole week; but I know how busy you are."

"Eighteen hours," he said decidedly. "To-morrow; the twelve-thirty. Now what do you think of that?"

"It seems hardly worth while coming for," I replied sincerely. "Can't you possibly make it—say a full day? There is a very good night train."

"I'm afraid not," he said, with quite a despondent air. "You see, it would cut into the next morning. As you say, it does hardly seem worth the journey, only I happened to have some business at Bristol. If it had not been for that I expect I should have sent Bobbie on alone."

"Bobbie?" I said, not catching his meaning. "Bobbie?"

"Why, yes," he continued cheerfully; "there is no particular hurry in his case, so I thought that I'd ask you to take him over for a few weeks. Measles, you know."

"What!" I exclaimed. "He has measles? Really, Henry——"

"Not at all," he interrupted with a smile; "only Florrie has. Consequently Bobbie can't go to school, and we thought that he'd be all the better out of the way."

"Out of your way?" I suggested, with perhaps just a shade of emphasis.

"Yes," he agreed simply; "Mary's in particular. She has enough to see to just now, dear woman."

"Oh," was all I said, but a moment later, feeling that something more was required, I added, "So this is Bobbie. It must be ten years since I saw him last. Now is he the Musical Prodigy or the Artistic Genius?" Of course I really knew that Bobbie was neither, but the remark came to my lips. All Henry's children are wonderful, and the surprising fact is that they seem able to convince other people of it besides their parents. I have given up the *Trafalgar Magazine* because of the frequency with which Vernon's drawings appeared in its pages, and any day if I am foolish enough to look down the outside sheet of the *Telegraph* I can be annoyed by seeing that Gertrude is singing "At Camberwell," or "In the City"—wherever that may exactly be. Bobbie was sure to be Something.

"No," replied Henry, "neither of those. He is the Scientific Phenomenon and engages in obscure mysteries in the back-kitchen. Chemistry, isn't it, Bobbie?"

"Yes, father," replied the boy, but at the mere word "chemistry" I saw him flush suddenly and pull nervously at his collar, before he edged away behind a palm. The

action was Henry's to the life. I could see him then, flushing and pulling at *his* collar thirty years ago at the casual mention of our cousin Mary.

"Chemistry, eh, my fine fellow?" I said encouragingly. "Then perhaps we shall be able to do one or two little experiments together and make a Roscoe of you yet." I should explain that chemistry—serious investigation I mean, of course, although I descended to Bobbie's level for the occasion—is the work to which I have devoted my life.

"Yes," said his father; "it's rather curious, now that I think of it. He was called after you, Robert."

Evidently he was already classing us together! And called after me; one knows what that means in the case of rich uncles.

"Oh, I had forgotten," I replied ingenuously. "Robert Barridge Troves?"

"No; only Robert," he admitted. "I was only referring to that."

"Ah! not Barridge, I thought," I said conclusively.

So Bobbie was left on my hands for that delightfully indefinite period referred to as "a few weeks."

"You won't find him a nuisance, I am sure," his father had said on leaving. "He has a unique gift of effacing himself completely; and I daresay that you can make him useful in your laboratory." I daresay, but the idea of giving a young ruffian the run of my most expensive instruments did not attract me. Why, the maid servants are never allowed to pass inside the door, and when the most careful Willet cleans the room up once a week it is only under my immediate eye. Nevertheless, I took him up, and standing with him by the door I pointed out the remarkable convenience of all the arrangements and the many delicate and costly instru-

ments. Somewhat to my surprise he knew the names of most of these, and even had a crude idea of their uses.

He was wonderfully like what Henry used to be at the same age, as I discovered more and more; also, it struck me next, curiously like some young animal—yes, an intelligent young dog. He had a way of coming quite close to one's side and looking up to see the expression as though it meant more than spoken words. He stood like that now at the door of my laboratory, so near that he pressed unconsciously against me until I moved away a little. As I spoke he watched my face, the emotions changing his own as openly as the clouds passing before the sun. It would not have required a great effort to imagine him whining or pricking up his ears, and when at last I turned to go he followed me like a hungry but obedient animal slowly retiring from a butcher's shop.

"Aren't I to be allowed in there, uncle, to do things?" he asked in a low voice, a whisper indeed, when I had locked the door, and as we walked away he took my hand—or, rather, tried to take my hand—in his eagerness.

"Oh, no, Bobbie," I replied very decidedly. "It is hardly the place for little boys to amuse themselves in. Think of the things I have shown you: the spectroscope and eudiometers, the air-pumps, Crookes' different apparatuses, and the intricate balances. A touch, a thoughtless frisk, and before you remember where you are, pounds and pounds' worth of damage is done. Now if I give you a little mercuric oxide and a test-tube, wouldn't you like to make oxygen in the scullery and surprise Jane by burning iron in it?"

I do not attempt to describe the look with which my young nephew received this well-meant attempt on my part to enter into his fancy for playing at chemistry, for I am sure that it would be beyond the power of a pen

usually devoted to the precise and exact formulæ of science. Perhaps had I then known that he had taken a high South Kensington certificate for practical analysis I might have framed the offer a little differently, but, after all, these science and art diplomas are recognised even among beginners as the brand of mediocre amateurism. I never thought it worth while competing for one myself, nor do I imagine that that eminent scientist and neighbour of mine, Sir Walter Bent, ever sought the questionable distinction; certainly I never heard him mention the fact ostentatiously if he had, in the way Bobbie has done more than once.

"What's the good of making oxygen out of mercuric oxide?" replied Bobbie, when, I suppose, he had looked at me as long as he wanted. "Why, it's one of the very first experiments, uncle. Don't you always feel that you want to find out things that have never been done before? I know that I do."

This, as one may imagine, amused me considerably.

"Why, my lad," I replied tolerantly, "what is there to find out? Nothing—practically nothing; certainly nothing that you will ever do. Of course, from time to time there will occasionally be some obscure discovery, but rest assured that on broad lines the limit of knowledge is almost reached."

I ought to be able to speak definitely on this point, because, as a matter of fact, until I recognised the futility of it, I had wasted some valuable time in speculative experimenting myself.

As far as his manner in general went, this nephew of mine was studiously respectful after he had once understood that I would have no childish affectation, but on this one subject I charitably assume that he is not entirely responsible for the nonsense that he talks.

"Nothing to be found out!" he cried vehemently.

"Why, uncle, there is everything yet. Nothing, nothing *has* been found out compared with what there must be. And to be content not to try is like—well, like a painter going on copying old pictures all his life."

I reproved him quietly, for it was out of the question to enter into an argument. Then I sent him to play in the garden, and went back to my own work. I only mention the incident now to show how immature and undisciplined his ideas were.

Some days later Bobbie approached me with a formal request. At the bottom of the garden he had found a tool-house which no one seemed to use, but it contained a bench and a fireplace, and was fitted with gas and water. Could he have this place "to do as he liked there?" I impressed on his young mind the fact that this would be a considerable privilege by withholding my decision for two days, and putting him on a rigorous trial during that period. But I need hardly say that the prospect of removing him to the bottom of the garden for the greater part of his visit was equally attractive to me, so at the end of the two days, after telling him that I was disappointed in him on the whole, I gave him permission. Nay, more, having just restocked the shelves and cupboards of my laboratory, I allowed him to carry away all the superfluous acids and reagents, and an accumulation of faulty test-tubes and other unserviceable glass.

I claim no particular merit in this; the liquids would otherwise have gone down the sink and the glass into the dust-cart, but the fact remains, and although I have never mentioned the obligation before, it is obvious that if the boy had really chanced to stumble upon any insignificant discovery (which I had never for a moment been disposed to admit), no inconsiderable share of the performance might be justly apportioned elsewhere.

How he passed his time I cannot say, for I never had the curiosity to enter the outhouse while he was there, and immediately after his return to London I ordered Willet to throw away everything that it contained, and to whitewash the place thoroughly. If he had been so careless as to blow himself up or to drink oxalic acid, I should have regarded the accident as outside my responsibility after the confidence which his own father had expressed. I saw very little of him except at meal-times, and I have since learned that when I was out he persuaded the cook (this self-effacing boy who would never be a nuisance) to let him smuggle down to the tool-house food not only for himself but also to feed, at my expense, a youth of the village whom he selected as an associate.

This person, Blithers by name, was the son of the local chemist, and although I understand that at home he showed a marked dislike for his father's business, he professed to become so attracted to Bobbie's society that he willingly and even enthusiastically accepted the position of honorary assistant in the tool-house. This, at least, was the view presented by the invaluable Willet in response to a hint on my part that he might occasionally find it necessary to loiter about the door of the shed and to look in at the windows as he passed, but one does not go through life without learning to become sceptical of these disinterested friendships, and the importance which a young person in Blithers's position would receive among his ordinary companions if he could claim a connection, however remote, with "The Grange," supplies a much more reasonable explanation.

The incentive on Bobbie's part is even less creditable, for it is now established beyond all doubt that the unhappy Blithers, in order to ingratiate himself, pilfered (yes, I am sorry that I am unable to substitute a milder

term, but that is the exact expression)—*pilfered* from his father's stock small but frequent supplies when their united pocket-money had become exhausted. I am perfectly well aware that no criminal action is being taken in the matter; that Blithers senior has been so weak-minded as to declare publicly that for the first time in his life he is proud of his son; and that a number of ridiculous comparisons have been made to the tenacity of a Dalton, the diffidence of a Cavendish, the fortuitous energy of a Priestley, and so on, but the one reliable fact standing among a mass of pretension and fulsome adulation is that this so-called new mineral owes its isolation to *theft,* and all who countenance its soi-disant "discoverer" are directly encouraging a felony.

About this time I finished a series of investigations on which I had been engaged in connection with our celebrated Campton chalybeate spring. It is usually referred to here as "celebrated," though I have never met any living soul ten miles beyond the Campton market cross who had ever heard of it; and one has to travel very little farther than that to find a majority who have even heard of Campton. Yet it has been conclusively proved that in similar circumstances the Campton water would be equally efficacious as that of Contrexéville, and competent local authorities have been unable to detect any inferiority in it to the products of Spa, Schwalbach, or Pyrmont; while, coming nearer home, it is frequently admitted that under capable development Campton might reasonably aspire to usurp the position of Harrogate as a health resort. In this labour, apart from the fascination of verifying the results of previous analysts, I confess that I had a second object.

I have already spoken of our distinguished resident, Sir Walter Bent. I had long recognised the advantage which would lie in being associated scientifically with

this great man, and in consequence I had frequently placed myself in such a position that a meeting under the most favourable auspices might be reasonably brought about. Unfortunately, Sir Walter did not enter at all into the social life of the district, and his memory was so bad, or his pre-occupation so great, that my discreet advances, which the easy etiquette of the countryside permitted on our chance encounters led to nothing.

On one occasion, for a period of a week, I spent every day, beginning at a very early hour indeed, geologising in some disused lime-pits a couple of miles outside the village on the Cornwall road. From a monograph which he had recently contributed to one of the reviews, I knew that Sir Walter was keenly interested in the Devonian strata, so that when I heard in an indirect way that he had spoken of spending that week working in the Cornwall road, the deduction was a very natural one on my part. The opportunity of being there before him and almost, as it were, receiving him attracted me.

As I have said, I did actually carry out this idea, and through a week of very unpleasant weather I resolutely held my ground, although the early start, the conditions under which I took my meals, and the uncongenial nature of the occupation (in which I felt no real interest) tried my patience repeatedly. At the end of the week as I passed the railway station on my way home I discerned the object of all my amiable strategy alighting from the London train. I then learned that he had been up in town all the time, carrying on some research at the Natural History Museum, and that his reference had in reality been to *Cromwell* Road, which the artless Willet had either misheard or simple-mindedly confused with the better-known local highway.

I will not deny that this experience depressed me, and for the next few months I retained a conviction that

independent research on my part would be the most beneficial to science in the end. Then, however, it was reported that Sir Walter had been taking the Campton water, and had derived some benefit from it; the project for developing the property was again raised, and the moment seemed an auspicious one for me to identify myself prominently with the subject. Doubtless I had referred to the work I had taken in hand to Henry in Bobbie's hearing, for during the first few days the boy had been persistent in his usual vein.

"Oh, uncle, you'll let me help you with the analysis, won't you?" he had cried excitedly, as soon as his father had gone, and even my reply that the work was of far too delicate a kind to be entrusted in any detail to the rough-and-ready practice of a school-boy did not repress him.

"Well, I suppose you have to be awfully careful about it," he admitted frankly. "Never mind, uncle; perhaps I can be doing something else while you are on that."

"You have to be very careful indeed," I said impressively. "Sometimes it is necessary to make repeated tests for so minute a quantity as a thousandth part of a grain—perhaps a mere speck to the naked eye—in a gallon of water."

"Yes," he replied, nodding carelessly. "Jehnsen's gold test reveals .0004 of a grain to the gallon."

I suppose these smatterings of general information are taught nowadays in the lower forms as "Nature Study." I dislike the system, and would have shown Bobbie how little real use a single superficial fact like that was when he suddenly went off on another line.

"Oh, I say, uncle," he exclaimed, "do you expect to find anything new in the Campton water? How spiffing if you do! What shall you call it? *Have* you got anything yet?"

"My good nephew," I said, "it is necessary to use com-

mon-sense in these matters, and I shall not even look for 'anything new,' as you so crudely term it. Recollect that the water has been minutely examined possibly a dozen or more times already."

"Then why do you want to do it again?" he demanded. "I see no fun in that, if you're satisfied."

"One does not conduct delicate and protracted experiments for fun," I replied. "The valuable corroboration of what has been previously arrived at by others is in itself a worthy and sufficient end, and the possibility of detecting a fractional variation, in one of the constituents gives an added zest."

"Well," he persisted, "I suppose that the waters at Bath had been analysed often enough before, but they found radium in them, for all that."

I could not refrain from smiling at his simplicity.

"Suppose, Bobbie," I said, "assuming the frankly absurd, and supposing that our spring did contain an unknown matter in solution, how much do you think that there would be in a gallon of water? The 'something new' would not be floating about in it like a duck's egg, you know."

"Well, admitting that it would be so minute that no test could detect it, and no microscope show it even if it could be collected, it would only be a thousandth part of what you could get from a thousand gallons," replied the foolish boy. "*That* might be appreciable."

I have seen it stated somewhere recently that no one says, "Pish!" or "Tush!" nowadays. It is a mistake; I said both to close the conversation, and sending Bobbie down the garden I went to my own work.

I was now composing the article embodying the results of my examination. These, as I have indicated, I had never expected to be startling, but they were painstaking and sound. I showed that Perring, who last ana-

lysed the water, in 1879, had made a miscalculation of an appreciable fraction of a grain in the amount of sulphate of soda.

Dealing with the historical aspect of the spring, I pointed out that as William of Orange must have passed within twenty miles of Campton on his march from Torbay, there was nothing extravagant in surmising that he might possibly have made an unrecorded detour to enjoy its benefits. This point had never been brought out before, but when the state of that monarch's health is considered, the theory becomes more and more feasible, and it has the advantage that if it came to be generally accepted it would confer upon Campton the royal patronage which seems to be essential to the popularity of any modern spa.

The article finished, I sent it to the local newspaper. I confess that a more classical medium would have pleased me better, but the pages of the "Transactions" of the various Societies are not impartially open, nor are those who control them amenable to social or commercial inducements. To the editor of the newspaper I explained who I was, and delicately suggested that I should probably require at least five dozen copies of the issue containing the article. Needless to say it was inserted, though not in the type which I myself would have chosen, nor in a position suitable to its importance. Furthermore, some of the typographical mistakes were appalling, especially in the matter of figures. I trust that the unknown readers were intelligent and discriminating, otherwise a too literal acceptance of the analysis would convey the impression that a gallon of the water contained three pounds of iron, half a hundredweight of lime, and so forth. In my own copies I neatly corrected these glaring absurdities, and then dispatched them by post to all the local notabilities.

To Sir Walter Bent I took the precaution of sending three marked copies. This was chiefly on account of his notorious absent-mindedness, and to make it more certain of catching his eye, I had one copy sent from London and another enclosed in a blue envelope marked "Private." I state these facts openly. *I*, at any rate, had nothing to fear from the fullest publicity. It has been related to me in confidence that my action throughout has furnished some amusement in certain quarters. Let it, I reply; it is at least free from the taint of criminality; it has never stooped to duplicity, belauded theft, nor compounded with felony. I repeat: Let it. I am not troubled by the opinion of my neighbours, I trust, and in any case it could not affect me, as I have accepted an invitation to spend Christmas in London, and am shutting up "The Grange" for some time.

The critical period, I have learned from Nature, is brief. The astronomer follows the course of a star for days, it may be, to note the phenomenon of a momentary contact; in a second the culmination of a protracted experiment is reached and passed with failure or success; after weeks of wavering the crisis of a fever arrives, and then and there the thing is settled. Therefore, having made my explanation, with no pretence of art but in a spirit of absolute candour, I will hasten on to what ensued.

Sir Walter would have received the papers on Wednesday morning. I hoped that Thursday would not pass without a sign of interest on his part, but the hope was not untempered by a doubt which rather loomed than lurked. However, on coming down to breakfast on Thursday, I saw at once that there was only one letter in my place, and with a thrill of expectation I recognised the Bent crest. I opened it at once; it ran as follows:

"My dear Sir,

"I have received your communication on the subject of the Campton water, and read it with the greatest attention. I do not doubt that your deductions are correct, and I will submit the matter to a definite proof, as you suggest, without delay. What you say incidentally about the disadvantage under which you have carried out the work adds to my interest, and I hope to have the pleasure of calling at 'The Grange' and making your acquaintance at an early date.

"Yours truly,

"Walter Bent."

At first I only glanced hurriedly down the lines, experiencing an almost astonished satisfaction at the extent to which I had—to use a term current, I believe, in financial circles—"roped in" the great scientist. With a second and closer reading, an element of indefinable doubt crept into my mind. It is true that in the course of the article I had found it necessary to refer to myself (though strictly in the third person), and even to touch lightly on my qualifications, but I could recall no expression indicating that I laboured under any difficulties whatever; it is equally true that I had written of Sir Walter himself in terms of graceful appreciation, but with no suggestion that called for his allusion to definite proof. I was beginning the letter for a third time when my nephew, who had been in the room all the time, I suppose, although I had not noticed him before, interrupted me.

"Excuse me, uncle," he said, "but as you seem puzzled, perhaps that letter is not for you."

I laid it down on the table and looked at him in speech-

less astonishment. Then I turned mechanically to the envelope.

"'Robert Troves, Esq., The Grange, Campton,'" I read aloud, and looked at him again. What on earth could he mean?

"Robert Barridge Troves?" he inquired politely. For two or three weeks the politeness of his tone whenever he has had occasion to address me has been overwhelming.

"No, simply 'Robert Troves,'" I said. Still I guessed nothing.

"Ah, not Barridge, I thought," he replied in the same courteous tone, but with a gleam in his eye, and I was so mystified at the time that it was not until several days later that, reviewing the conversation, I longed to box his ears.

"This letter is from Sir Walter Bent, in reply to an article which I have recently published," I said, looking from him to the letter and back again at him in turn, for at the moment I could do nothing else in my surprise.

"In that case I am sorry I spoke," said Bobbie, resuming his breakfast. "Seeing that you appeared as though you could not quite make it out, I thought that it might possibly be for me."

He went on eating calmly, but I confess that I could not.

"Had you any reason to expect a communication from Sir Walter?" I said, after a few minutes' silence.

"I thought that there might be," he replied. "I left some things there the other day, and a letter about them."

I read the note through again, and I felt even less appetite than before.

"Pray what were the things, Bobbie?" I asked, and

my voice was intended to convey a kindly interest in his pursuits, not mere curiosity, still less anxiety.

"Oh, some salts," he said, with obviously forced unconcern. "We have been analysing the water here, and I rather imagined that it contained a new element."

If the "celebrated" spring had suddenly discharged itself upon my head, the feeling of cold dismay could scarcely have been more intense. "A new element—in the chalybeate waters here!" I gasped—I am afraid that I must use that expression. "A new element, and *you* found it, and sent it to Sir Walter Bent, and this is his reply to *you!* How—how did you do it?"

"Oh, we just analysed it," said the hardened young ruffian, affecting to appear bored. "Being there, of course we found it."

Drowning men, one reads, see their whole past lives in a flash. I was drowning, metaphorically, in the Campton water; certainly I was experiencing most of the actual sensations; and for the next few minutes I enjoyed the mortification of a kaleidoscopic view of my future life if only I had stood in my nephew's shoes. A *new* element! Not merely undetected before in the Campton spring, but new to science. What might have been! I saw long vistas of platforms, myself enthroned on each; unending crowds of black-coated men eagerly surrounding one central figure—myself; interminable streams of professors in academic robes; countless articles in journals of every imaginable kind, from the airy, snappy, inaccurate "par" of the halfpenny daily to the weighty essay of the quarterly—yes, in those brief seconds I even *read* some of the opening sentences; flocks of honorary degrees. And now that ever-to-be-execrated treatise in the local sheet—placid, vacuous, self-satisfied, with *this* on its heels—doomed to involve me in unending ridicule. Why, why, in heaven's name, had not *I* looked

for some imperceptible, elusive, unisolated atom of radio-active matter?

"I suppose that you did not care to tell me of it at the time," I remarked; and upon my word I did not feel that I could justly imply a reproach.

"Yes, I did mention it," replied Bobbie, "but I don't think that you were interested."

He had! I remembered then that a few days before he had spoken diffidently of "something" which he believed he had found in the water. I was preoccupied at the moment, and if I gave the matter a thought it was only to associate the "something" with a lead soldier or an old shilling. I imagine that I told him not to bother me but to run out and play.

Another train of possibilities flashed through my mind. If only I had even then turned a sympathetic ear—an ear at all, in fact—the sequel might have been very different. The investigation would have been transferred to my laboratory; Blithers would have been gradually dispensed with; I could, if necessary, have become Bobbie's assistant; inevitably, after the little joke had been kept up long enough, Bobbie would have seen the propriety, in view of our ages, positions, and my unstinted generosity, of . . . Again the long vistas of platforms, the crowds, the articles. . . .

"How much water did you evaporate?" I asked, coming back to things as they were.

"A thousand gallons, uncle," replied Bobbie. Again history was repeating itself. A thousand gallons! And all with my best Silkstone, I suppose. Evidently another detail of Bobbie's thoughtful self-effacement!

"Mostly in tin kettles," added Bobbie.

Yes! If this new element is to be paraded before the scientific world, let it be known how it was obtained. Evaporated in tin kettles, precipitated in the very crudest

manner in faulty test-tubes, sublimated in cracked flasks, fused on discarded charcoal with home-made blow-pipes. Pounded, washed, filtered—a hundred times, a thousand times; painfully, toilsomely, tirelessly.

"What is it?" I asked. I could not walk away in dignity now and ignore the thing; it had got past that. Nor could I now send Bobbie to play in the garden.

"Chloride of *x* as yet," he replied. "Of course, it may all be a mistake really. You see, I had no spectroscope; that is why I sent to Sir Walter Bent."

"Oh, we can soon settle that," I exclaimed cheerfully. Why should I not identify myself even at the eleventh hour? "Let us go up to the laboratory."

Bobbie did not get up.

"Thank you, uncle," he said politely, "but I would rather not. You see"—he paused a moment, then decided to go on—"you see, a touch, a thoughtless frisk——"

He did not finish and I turned to leave the room. I had nothing to say. What was there for me to say? Simply nothing.

"Oh, I am a cad!" cried Bobbie suddenly, before I had reached the door. "Do forgive me, uncle; please do."

"My dear lad——" I expostulated, looking back.

"I should like to tell you, uncle, please," he went on, a little wildly for the self-contained youth of the last few weeks. "When father came back from here, a year ago, he told us what a splendid laboratory you had built, and as much as he could remember about the things you had —everything that one could possibly need, he said. I got him to tell me over and over again, and for a year I longed and longed"—"and prayed," I think he said, but his voice went very low—"to be able to come here. I had the most wonderful dreams often of being here and

helping you in your work, surrounded by millions and millions of bottles and all illuminated by thousands of bunsen-burners. I thought that perhaps if you found that I could be useful and careful you might let me stay —for a long time, I mean. Well, suddenly I heard that I was to come, and I was wild with it. Then—then, it was quite different, you know. I think it was because I thought more of coming than of Florrie being ill."

There were tears in his eyes—for Florrie I am sure. I have said before that he was the Henry of old again, but as he sat there in the uncertain light, shaken by this most unBobbie-like outburst, by my soul it was the living Mary who faced me. I think I have already declared that I have nothing to conceal throughout. I may be an ass; doubtless I *am* a middle-aged, solitary ass (which concerns that same cousin Mary), but I certainly did not feel one at the moment. Yet without any consideration of dignity, or any idea of what I should do next, I strode back to the table and kissed Bobbie on the top of the head. There was no need to consider what to do then, for after one single startled glance Bobbie dropped his face upon his arms among the breakfast-things and burst into a veritable storm of sobs.

I went at once. My last impression of the scene was a glimpse of Sir Walter's letter floating off the table on the crest of a noble wave of coffee.

. . . . . .

Sir Walter Bent came the next day and we received him together. I said very little at all, which was doubtless the inspiration for the great man to remark blandly to me during a pause, "I hope, Mr. Troves, that you will excuse our talking 'shop'—'shop,' too, of a kind which I have reason to think is particularly trying to an outsider, but the remarkable interest of your nephew's discovery—" He waved his hand to indicate the rest.

"Oh!" chimed in Bobbie's clear voice, "my uncle isn't an outsider, sir. He has the most clinking lab. that there ever could be, and we have been there all the morning. If it hadn't been for the things he gave me we shouldn't have been able to do anything. He is the kindest man in the world, really. Except father, of course," he added thoughtfully, and then, in sudden confusion, "and—oh, I beg your pardon—perhaps yourself, sir!"

I was thankful for the mighty roar of laughter from Sir Walter as he disclaimed any chance in the competition. I felt the ass then; but not the middle-aged solitary ass.

. . . . . .

There is a deaf old lady, a Miss Mitterdrop, who lives in the village here. She hears nothing and talks incessantly.

"They tell me," she said, stopping me in the street yesterday, "that you used to make your nephew stand all day in a pit of cold water at the bottom of your garden, and that he found a lot of valuable minerals there." And she peered at me from under her ancient bonnet like an inquisitorial fowl.

"Madam," I replied, as politely as one could, "the only pit at the bottom of my garden is a melon pit."

She looked at me shrewdly and nodded twice.

"Yes, on the Day of Judgment," she said, and hobbled on.

I relate the trifling incident to show what I may expect. Of the fantastic contortion of her next version of the affair and of our conversation, the reader can form as accurate a forecast as I can myself. To set the matter at rest I have therefore thought it well to draw up this plain, unvarnished record.

I am again taking in the *Trafalgar Magazine,* and each day I look down the front page of the *Telegraph* before

anything else. Relations, I conclude, supply one of the interests in life, and in effect it is immaterial whether the pleasure is obtained by enlarging their shortcomings and envying their success or in sharing the success and ignoring the defects.

Vernon and Gertrude are coming to stay with me at Easter. Bobbie and Florrie wait until the midsummer holidays, because they can then stay longer. I think I have already mentioned that, after Bobbie left, I had the tool-house cleared out and done up. As it stood, the association was not altogether pleasant to me, and I hit upon a splendid idea of turning it into a rabbit-house and stocking it, as a surprise. I am rather afraid that my nephew's enthusiasm will lead him to spend too much time indoors unless I provide counter-attractions.

As I felt my judgment in boys' tastes to be unreliable I wrote to Florrie in confidence and asked her advice. She suggests river picnics, tennis parties, and a motor-car. I shall include these, but I confess that I still have great faith in rabbits.

Hampton Hill, 1904.

XVI

The Heart of the Pagan

AS a matter of fact," said young Holt, "I was coming up to your place if I had not seen you. We are most desperately short of men this harvest, and my father thought that perhaps you could lend him one or two until you started cutting your oats."

Andrew Garstang, senior, the burly, shrewd, independent yeoman of Stonecroft Farm, leaning over one of his field gates, looked at Andrew Garstang, junior, who stood in the road by his horse's side. Both were amused so much that half a minute passed before either made reply.

"Why, Harold," said the younger Andrew, "where do you think I've been to get my horse in this state? Scouring the whole countryside for five blessed hours trying to pick up a few tramps or dead-beats to make shift with ourselves."

"And what have you done?" asked Harold with interest.

"Got hungry, that's all. And now I'm going up to have my tea. You may as well come with us, Harold."

"I should much like to," said Harold, with every appearance of sincerity, "but I must go somewhere else, if only to make a decent show."

The two Garstangs had already turned away, when along the road a strange and unfamiliar figure was seen approaching.

"What outlandish kind of foreigner is that, now?" demanded the farmer, staring down the road.

"A gipsy?" suggested his son, as the stranger got nearer. "I saw some of their vans down Sprostock way."

"Why, I do believe," exclaimed Harold suddenly, "it's an infernal Chinee! What on earth can one of those reptiles be doing in Overbury?"

It was a speculation that might well excite curiosity. Yen Sung himself could have supplied a very meagre outline of his journeyings, and even that he would have thought it prudent to withhold in the face of every inducement, not including actual torture. The beginning of the story would have gone back more than a single year, and as far as the township of Lien Ning, on the banks of the Pei-kiang. It would have exhibited a wide range of Oriental nature and disclosed a little jealousy, some high-handed official tyranny, bloodshed, a fixed belief in the virtue of revenge and in the inexorable demands of the spirits of the dead, more bloodshed, the insidious implication of the Triad League, and the final outcome of a tribal feud. It involved Yen Sung—whose interest in the original cause of the strife was of the slightest—and by wave after wave of development it finally cast him, under a new name and with a highly fictitious account of himself, among his countrymen in Limehouse. His object was to lose all association with the past, and doubtless he might have succeeded had not another family matter requiring adjustment (not in the remotest degree connected with Yen Sung) called for the assassination of an amiable Shanghai merchant, in London on business. The Chinese abroad have the strongest objection to invoking the assistance of the police, possibly as a result of their experience of the official classes at home, so that the remains of the Shanghai gentleman were sent back to his family in a crate bearing a label "Photographic Accessories. To be opened

only in a ruby light. Perishable," and went through in the most correct manner. But, as the merchant was a person of some importance, an informal tribune considered the case, and discreet inquiries about the new-comer Yen Sung were set afoot with the object of ascertaining whether he was sufficiently friendless to be suffocated quietly and sent on in a second crate by the next boat as a peace offering to the outraged relations at Shanghai. A casual act of charity towards a poor countryman, on Yen Sung's part, was the means of saving him. The decision of the committee went against him, but before anything could be done a little block of wood, shaped into the semblance of a miniature coffin and bearing his own name, appeared miraculously in the fold of his sleeve as he walked along the Causeway. Before the incident took place Yen Sung's expression was that of a person who gazes into futurity in a contemplation of the Confucian Analects. Without varying a single line of his preoccupation, without apparently withdrawing his eyes and mind from a sublime engrossment in the Beyond, Yen Sung saw the symbol, read the name, and perfectly understood the warning. He continued to saunter on; presently he was out of the district which he knew, but Confucius and the North-West appeared to draw him on. By evening he had passed through Watford, and when night fell he entered a wood and slept there. The next morning he resumed his journey without a word of inquiry about the route, believing that in a blind and unreasoning course lay his only hope. But, sparely as he lived, the little money he had was soon exhausted, and he found himself face to face with the necessity of seeking some unfamiliar employment.

The three men stood curiously at the gate as he approached. A foreigner might have been excused if, in search of authority, he had addressed the dapper Harold

or the man who bestrode a horse; but it was the elder Garstang whom Yen Sung saluted with grave courtesy.

"I seek one," he said, with an air of perfect self-possession, "bearing the illustrious name Ga-tang. A wayfarer, following the sun, spoke of the rider upon a horse who offered a just reward to all who would labour in his fields."

Surprise held them for a moment, but it was plain beyond all mistake that this strange being was offering his services as a harvester.

"I don't think that it's work you would care about, unless you've been used to it," said Garstang doubtfully, his conservative ideas of the fixed order of things not quite at ease.

"Try," replied Yen Sung laconically. "Not work honourably, not pay honourably."

"I am giving half-a-crown a day, overtime, and bagging," remarked Garstang technically.

"It is sufficient," replied Yen Sung with the dignity of a Mandarin of the Sapphire Button. Why should he admit to these barbarians that he had not the remotest idea of what any of the three inducements comprised?

"But, Mr. Garstang," interposed Harold, "surely you are not going to engage him?"

"Yea," replied Garstang, regarding the young man with his shrewd, placid gaze. "May as well, Harold. We can't pick and choose now."

"But just think what sort of a man you are bringing into the neighbourhood, sir," urged Harold. "One of the most degraded race on the face of the earth—a pagan and an idol worshipper."

Garstang opened his eyes in gentle surprise. He was a staunch Churchman, but it was not the custom—to state the case mildly—to carry religious tests into the harvest-field. Nor, unless innuendo missed its mark,

did Holt, senior, invariably regulate his business during the last six days of the week by the sentiments to which he gave open profession on the first.

"I mean," continued Harold, "that, being a heathen, he will have no ideas of right and wrong. A friend who has been in Australia tells me that they are the most treacherous, bloodthirsty, and revengeful creatures in existence—more like animals, in fact. I hope that you understand me, sir, when I say that you are really taking very grave risks."

"They eat birds' nests, don't they?" remarked the younger Andrew with a well-meaning effort to include himself in the conversation.

"They eat anything that is filthy," said Harold, with elegant disdain. "Rats and mice and cattle that have died of disease."

So far this frank exposition of his national qualities had been carried on within Yen Sung's hearing, despite the fact that he could probably understand at least the essentials of every sentence, although nothing animate could have more successfully preserved an expression of absolute vacuity. But now Harold stepped nearer to the Garstangs, and in spite of the contemptuous intensity of his tone nothing could be heard of his words beyond an occasional disconnected phrase. ". . . really too horrible to . . . dozens of cases . . . and then murdered . . . rather commit suicide . . . for Miss Edith's sake . . You cannot warn . . ."

"What is that about 'Miss Edith'?"

The three men turned quickly at the voice. A very fair young girl, not rustic, but wearing the grace and freedom that spring from the English soil, had approached unseen by the field path and stood smiling by the gate.

"The proverb has no terrors for you, Miss Edith,"

said Harold with easy gallantry. "*You* need never fear hearing ill of yourself."

"I was not listening," she replied; "but I did hear my name."

"The simple fact," volunteered Harold lightly, "is that a very undesirable alien wanted to be taken on for harvesting, and I was endeavouring to persuade your father to harden his naturally benevolent heart. Is her exacting ladyship satisfied?"

"But what have I to do with it?" she persisted.

"I was merely reminding your father of the many valuable articles lying about which might excite the cupidity of a covetous stranger."

She laughed, still unsatisfied; but another step brought her to the gate, and then the patient figure of the awaiting Celestial fell upon her surprised gaze and drove every other thought from her mind. With a curiosity quite free from shyness or alarm she approached Yen Sung with a friendly smile, as one who seeks to make a strange guest feel more at home.

"Do you speak English?" she asked.

"Most imperfectly, honourable lady," he replied.

She started a little at the quaint form of address, but there could be no doubting the perfect courtesy of Yen Sung's manner.

"You have come a very long way," she continued. It was a strange, new thing for her to stand face to face with this queerly-clad wanderer. She would have liked to ask him many things about his far-off home.

"A dead leaf is easily carried by the wind," replied Yen Sung, who smiled also. It was a very faint smile, scarcely worth the name, but it was the first sign of the lighter emotion he had shown for many months.

"But you must have seen a great many wonderful places; and, of course, to us your own country is the

most wonderful of all." His presence conjured up a thousand bright visions within her eager mind—of sun-flashing, burnished temples and graceful pagodas, rice fields greener than any English meadow in the spring, palm-dotted deserts, forests of bamboo, and azalea-covered hills; rivers and canals crowded with junks, sampans, and motley craft; stockaded towns, their fantastic streets filled with strange types or full of silent mystery beneath the moon. Doubtless the picture was quite unreal, but it was none the less fascinating, and the knowledge of it seemed all to be centred in Yen Sung.

To her remark, however, he only bowed acquiescently. Limited as his experience of English custom might be, he possessed both the quick intuition and the keen observation of his race, and he divined that the interest of this barbarian maiden would not be to his immediate advantage.

"I think that you are possibly under a misapprehension, Miss Garstang," suggested Harold, coming forward with an expression that was a little awry in its smiling effort. "This fellow is not an educated traveller who will be able to gratify your thirst for information, but a common tramp asking your father to take him on as a harvester—doubtless some seaman or stoker who has deserted from his ship and now anxious to keep out of the way."

"It must be very hard to be friendless in a foreign country and to have to ask for work among strangers," observed Edith sympathetically, pointedly addressing herself to Yen Sung; "but I am sure that you will have no more trouble, because my father never refuses work to anyone who really wants it. Then if you like to come up to the farm you can have some tea." She nodded to Harold quite graciously, reminded her father that it was nearly six o'clock, and disappeared along the field path.

"Well, Harold, it's no use; we can't help ourselves, you see," declared Garstang with an air of amused resignation which only half disguised an equally amused satisfaction.

"Oh, I don't mind," said Harold quickly; "only, knowing what I do, I thought it was my duty to warn you. I suppose you have a proverb applicable to the occasion, eh, Ah-John?"

"We have a saying, 'When the road bends we cannot see what lies before us,' " admitted Yen Sung indifferently.

"A very safe assertion to make, too," replied Harold, turning to resume his way; "but we can often guess, my pagan friend." He smiled frequently to himself on the journey, but it was not a pleasant smile, and a good many wayside flowers and overhanging boughs were prematurely cut off by his vindictive cane.

The following day marked the opening of the oat harvest, and Yen Sung took his place among the half-dozen men whose task consisted in tying up the sheaves and throwing them aside out of the path of the horses before the reaping machine made its round again. Garstang initiated him into all that there was to learn in the process—the peculiar knot by which the band is secured. "You may find it to be a bit ockard at first, but you'll soon pick it up," he remarked kindly; but with the fatal imitative genius of his countrymen Yen Sung had already picked it up and was reproducing the knot, even down to the minute and accidental detail of a tuft of broken ends protruding at a certain point. The farmer was turning away satisfied when a thought occurred to him. "By the way," he added, taking out his wage-book, "I don't think I have asked you your name yet."

"Claude!" replied Yen Sung with transparent simplicity. He had noticed the name over a shop window

as he passed through the village, and he now adopted it as a pleasant little compliment to the neighbourhood.

"Any other?" asked the farmer, whose knowledge of the ways of the Central Kingdom was not extensive.

"Of the obscure house of Kiu," replied Yen Sung for no particular reason, and as Claude Kiu he remained in the annals of Stonecroft Farm.

The days and weeks passed by; all the harvesting was over, but Yen Sung still remained. Why, on his part, it might be hard to say, for he had enough money now to take him safely out of the country, and had he been a human being instead of a mere yellow man it would have to be written that at Stonecroft Farm he suffered much. The men early discovered that he never returned a blow, so, to confess the shameful truth, to prove their manliness or to impress their moral superiority, some frequently struck and kicked him. Dead mice and other carrion were thrown into his food as he ate, in exquisite drollery. Whenever Harold Holt visited the farm he never failed to drop upon good ground a few light-hearted suggestions for turning Yen Sung's eccentricities to humorous account. Garstang rather liked the impassive pagan, but there was much taking place that he could not see.

If he might be judged by his works, Yen Sung outshone all his associates in the Christian virtues. To the blow on the right cheek he turned the left; he was patient, industrious, long-suffering; he bore the burdens of others. Only, it should be recorded that in moments of solitude, especially after suffering an indignity, Yen Sung sometimes took a very bright knife from beneath his tunic and proceeded to whet it quietly and systematically upon his leather belt, although it was always keen enough to split a hair. This might have given some colour to Harold's warning were it not that the Oriental

mind remains an insoluble riddle, and it would be as reasonable and more charitable to assume that Yen Sung's formidable blade was intended for no more desperate purpose than that of smoothing its owner's chin. There is even a more amiable possibility, for one morning about this time Edith Garstang found upon her plate at the breakfast-table a little box of wood and inlaid straw, which proved to contain a variety of figures carved with taste and untiring skill in bone and fruit stones, and one or two in ivory. There were mandarins in official robes; trees of gnarled, fantastic growth; tigers, elephants and serpents; a wonderful street scene, with stalls, merchants, beggars, a procession of priests, and all the details of a busy thoroughfare; a child-bride in her ornamental wedding-chair; and a number of fearsome objects which could only be accounted for as evil demons, though more probably in Yen Sung's mind they stood as the embodiment of beneficent spirits. It was a collection which must have occupied all his spare hours almost from the day of his arrival.

Edith was enchanted with the grace and delicacy of the pretty things, but Garstang remained thoughtfully silent, and when the story came to Harold's ears he vowed softly between smiling lips that Yen Sung should presently suffer somewhat for his presumption. The immediate settlement arrived at by Garstang was to take the box in one hand and a sovereign in the other, and to tell Yen Sung kindly but definitely that he must take back the toys or be paid with the money. It furnished fresh proof of the sordid nature of the Chinaman's instincts, for he took the coin without a word of protest, and when alone cheerfully added it to his secret store. Thenceforth he carved no more, occupying himself with the composition of sundry notices in his own tortuous language, which he afterwards fastened to the branches

of the largest trees, or to buildings, and even cast into the streams. A local wit affected to regard these documents as Boxer proclamations; in reality they were invocations addressed to the tutelary spirit residing within the tree or building or stream committing "the most honourable sun-haired maiden" to its unceasing protection; recommending a benevolent interest in the general affairs of the "large-bodied earth-tiller Ga-tang"; and requesting as a personal favour to Yen Sung that the tree or building would fall upon, or the stream engulf, "the rat-lipped outcast whose polluted ancestral altar lies beyond the hill-top."

The "most honourable maiden" herself was never without a smile and a word of greeting for Yen Sung when she passed him at his work. She cross-examined him out of his polite dissimulation on the subject of food and obtained some small concessions to provide a simple fare more suited to his tastes. His oblique eyes took her up at the earliest possible point of vision, and, still intent upon his work, he continued to watch her stealthily until the last glimpse of her white dress was hidden from his sight; but by no interest or encouragement could he be induced to cease work during his working hours. Amused, half-piqued, and curious to learn, she was driven to approach him at a more convenient time, when, in the monotonous tone and passionless narration of his race, he told her all she asked. About himself he lied without the least consciousness of shame or ingratitude, painting for her benefit a purely imaginary picture of his home, his life, his kinspeople, and all that pertained to Yen Sung; but the picture, though individually deceptive, was typically correct, so that in time Edith Garstang in her remote English home began to raise a little of the veil of the mysterious land and even to find some

slight foothold among the shifting complexities of the Celestial mind.

It was a continual matter for self-reproach to her that she did not bring about Yen Sung's conversion to a better faith; but, with surprise, she found an increasing difficulty in urging her own religion upon this courteous, high-minded pagan. She shrank from the shameful justice of the reproach in case Yen Sung should indicate the blasphemers, the Commandment-breakers, the thieves and the persecutors by whom he was surrounded and ask in a voice requiring no irony of tone, "Are these, too, Christians?"

In his own land Yen Sung burned joss-sticks to many deities, including one, blind and inexorable, whom we might call Destiny. Being at so great a distance from home, and therefore almost out of the sphere of influence of these deities, he had perhaps grown lax in his observances, or it may be that a supply of the proper worshipping materials was not obtainable in Overbury. Whatever the cause, this same Destiny determined to render Yen Sung a sharp account of her presence, he having no powerful beneficent deities to intervene, and the spirits of his ancestors presumably being all engaged in China. The visible outcome was that on a raw November afternoon two of the labourers returned to the house assisting Yen Sung, who walked very uncertainly between them.

It then appeared that there had been a very unfortunate accident. Six men in all were concerned, including Harold, who had walked across the field on his way up to the house, and there were five different and occasionally conflicting accounts, Yen Sung himself contributing nothing. The five Stonecroft men had been engaged in collecting, carting, and burning the dried potato-tops when Harold appeared. Someone had playfully

thrown a potato (the accepted version), which Someone else caught and returned. Then Someone threw another, and in a minute a game was in progress, with all engaged except Yen Sung, who continued his duty of replenishing the fires. Unfortunately, Someone threw the potato in the direction of Yen Sung, and the Someone whose turn it was to catch it, with no eyes except for the missile, had run in and precipitated the unfortunate Chinaman into the heart of the fire. Everyone was sorry.

There chanced to be a decent room over a loose-box empty at that time, and here, on a pallet, Yen Sung was made as comfortable as possible. Harold himself rode for a doctor, and Everyone was much relieved to learn that although severely burned here and there Yen Sung was in no danger of dying. With the cloud of a possible inquest lifted a lighter vein prevailed. Harold declared that they need not have worried, as it was impossible to kill a Chinee—they all died natural deaths; and before night it came to be agreed that it was Yen Sung's own fault and the result of his persistent habit of getting into people's way.

He made an ideal patient. He never complained, and seemed to find no difficulty in remaining quiescent, bodily and mentally, for days together. He accepted the doctor as "benevolently intentioned," and did as he was told in spite of a little private incredulity as to the efficacy of remedies applied without incantations or even coloured lights.

Yen Sung celebrated the beginning of his third week in the loft by sitting up for the first time.

"But on no account must he go out yet," reiterated the doctor for the sixth time to Miss Garstang. "I sometimes wonder most poignantly whether it's the sublimest philosophy or merely a lacquered mask over absolute

vacuity that the fellow wears. Does he understand?"

"Oh, yes; only he is very patient," replied Edith, who generally took the instructions. "I am sure he will do as you say."

"Well, Kiu, my friend," he continued, turning again to Yen Sung, "let the prosaic but sincere work of the barbarian medicine-man sink into your retentive Oriental mind. Although you are on the mend, you are for that reason to take all the more care. Shun the insidious delight of potato-top burning or any other outdoor exercise until I give you leave to stir. If you go out and get cold or wet you will most certainly join the spirits of your illustrious ancestors."

"It is as the all-seeing Buddha ordains," replied Yen Sung imperturbably, but he quite accepted the warning.

Edith accompanied the doctor to the yard and then returned to the loft.

"I am going to Overbury now," she remarked after she had made up the fire and given a glance round the room. "Is there anything that you would like; anything that I could get you?"

Yen Sung shook his head. There was nothing that he required.

"I am going to buy my Christmas cards," she continued, lingering. "You know what Christmas is, Kiu?"

"The Season of Much Gladness," replied Yen Sung from his couch.

Two pitiful tears formed suddenly in Edith's eyes. "We say 'Peace on Earth and Goodwill to Men,' " she said in a low voice.

"Peace on Earth and Goodwill to Men," repeated the pagan. Fifty years ago, he was remembering, his father's house had been shelled to the ground by the navies of two most Christian nations at this same season of "Peace on Earth and Goodwill to Men" in order that equally

Christian merchants might carry on a lucrative trade in poison with a nation that did not want it.

"You have perhaps read some part of the little book I brought?" she asked timidly after a moment's pause. On a table within his reach lay a copy of the New Testament.

"I have read somewhat of the words, honourable lady Edith," he replied, his usual impassiveness cloaking any feeling he might have either of interest or indifference.

She could venture no further. "I must go now," she announced, glancing at the window. "It is coming dark already."

It was, indeed, very dark, even for a December afternoon, and as she spoke a roll of distant thunder told the cause. Yen Sung glanced through the window also, and into his face there came an expression more indicative of emotion than anything he had yet betrayed.

"If it be permitted me to speak unasked, might not the venture of this journey be put off to a more auspicious day?" he said earnestly. "Very soon the rain will descend in torrents, the lightning will tear open the sky, and doubtful powers will then be able to launch their thunderbolts even against the most virtuous."

"I am not afraid of the thunder and lightning," replied Edith with a smile; "and as for the rain, see, I am well provided against it."

"But the omen—even as you declared your purpose the thunder spoke," he persisted. "Furthermore, by a most unpropitious chain of events, the road you must take lies to the north, while at this season the high heavens are situate directly in the south." Suddenly a look almost of terror came into his eyes. "Stay, most honourable," he gasped; "what day of your twelfth moon do you call this?"

"It is the eleventh day of the twelfth month—our December," she replied.

Yen Sung made a rapid calculation in his mind, converting the date into its equivalent in his own system of time. Twice, three times, he repeated the process in his anxiety, and then, as the unevadable fact was driven home to him, he leaned forward in trembling anxiety.

"You must not go forth to-day, lady Edith; you cannot go," he whispered fearfully. "It is a day of the blackest omen and the direst possibilities. It is the one day of an entire cycle of years when all the diverging lines of evil, from whatever cause arising, meet in one irresistible concentration. Demons, foul dragons, and the malevolent shadows of all the unworthy dead are abroad and supreme to-day, while the benevolent forces stand powerless. So far back as last New Year's Day a special Imperial edict went forth warning all that they should give no feast, go on no journey, nor engage in any new enterprise upon this most abandoned day. Even I, in the obscurity of this hidden chamber, would not have ventured to leave my couch to-day had I not most incapably forgotten. How then, shall you take a journey directly away from the high heavens and after the portent of the thunder?"

It was so real to him as he spoke—one who all his life had walked with evil spirits on the one side and good spirits on the other; surrounded by demons whose supposed prejudices had to be conformed to in every action—that Edith listened half in pity and half in despair. It would have seemed cruel to her to leave him abruptly in his real distress. With an inspiration a means occurred to her not only of reassuring him but even of turning the incident to good account.

"I am not afraid," she replied serenely, "for I carry

a safeguard against which no power of evil can prevail." A little gold cross, plain save for the three initials which it bore, hung by a slender chain about her neck. She touched it as she spoke.

Here was something that Yen Sung could fully understand; it appealed, naturally and convincingly, to one whose religion was steeped in idolatry, witchcraft and geomancy. Suspended about *his* neck there also hung a powerful charm, a square of parchment inscribed with mystic characters, drawn out by one of the most successful necromancers of the age. It was an infallible specific against leprosy and shipwreck, and, in token, Yen Sung had never contracted leprosy or been shipwrecked. If only he had provided himself with a similar protection against the perils of fire he would certainly have escaped his present plight; but one cannot foresee everything. A charm of universal potency excited his wonder and admiration. It did not occur to him that Edith might not be speaking quite literally—that her geometrical device was a symbol more efficacious when carried in the heart than when worn among the garments.

"Is there, indeed, no possible contingency against which this talisman might fail?" he asked, scarcely yet fully reassured.

"If I believe in its power and wear it faithfully there is nothing in the whole world that can harm me. Are you not satisfied, Kiu?"

"Your lips are incapable of guile, nor can alloy pass for gold before the touch of a pure heart," replied Yen Sung.

He watched her cross the yard; he marked the clang of the iron gate as she turned into the narrow lane beyond; then for five minutes he sat motionless—so unbreathingly still that not one of the grotesque idols in

his far-off ancestral temple could have seemed more devoid of being.

A vivid flash of lightning recalled him from his thoughts and lit up the room with an electric brilliance for one moment. It brought out every detail as the sun had never done, and picked up in that short second, and seemed to fling it back to meet Yen's staring eyes, one bright object lying by the door. Then darkness.

In the overwhelming shock of the discovery Yen Sung's mind was momentarily eclipsed by a blow that stunned—a feeling of irreparable disaster that closed round his heart like a grasp of ice. He shook himself free, and, falling upon hands and knees, swiftly sought the spot. The half-light had returned after the darkness, sufficient, with face bent to the floor, for him to verify the worst. The little magic talisman that the most gracious lady Edith had wholly and implicitly relied upon to guard her on her perilous way lay beneath his eyes. And she had gone!

His mind, freed from its numbness, leapt now. She had gone forth, unconscious of her loss, into that most evil day when the unrestrained powers of darkness, loose from ten thousand unchained hells, would surround her in every form. She had gone out heralded by the most ill-destined omen from the skies. She had gone where her very direction cut her off from the slenderest possibility of relief.

At all cost she must be overtaken and the safeguard restored to her at once. Every second was precious, every step she took full of danger. He had no means of communicating with the house; the yard beneath his window was deserted. In spite of the honourable doctor's warning, Yen Sung himself must set in motion the means for her deliverance.

He moved quickly, feverishly, but with due caution, or

he might utterly defeat his end; for who could say but that his unworthy touch might destroy the virtue of the charm or immediate death be the fruit of his presumption? A half-burned twig lay on his hearth; deftly, in spite of his bandaged hands, Yen Sung wound the chain about it; then, as fast as his weak limbs would carry him, he sought the house.

"See!" he exclaimed, bursting into the great kitchen where Edith's mother chanced to be engaged alone; "the fair one of your house has gone forth on a most perilous journey and the charm upon which she alone relied for protection has escaped her unperceived. Let a speedy messenger be sent before harm reaches her."

"Whatever are you doing out on a day like this?" exclaimed Mrs. Garstang without paying any attention to his excited words. She was a woman of sound practical common-sense, and had found it simpler in her dealings with Yen Sung to regard him as quite irresponsible. "After what the doctor said, too! Go back this very minute."

"But the charm?" he protested blankly. "The safeguard upon which the most kind of heart depends?"

"Oh, Edith's little cross?" she said without concern, noticing it for the first time. "Yes, I'll give it to her when she comes back. Now, do make haste, Kiu. Here, I'd better get Andrew to you."

She left the kitchen to call her husband, and in the impotence of his position a despair more hideous than before fell on Yen Sung.

Blind! Mad! He knew they were not cruel; some fatal obliquity of vision hid his view from them, their view from him; but was the gentlest and fairest to be sacrificed? He remembered the tone in which she had spoken of the power of the charm—the soft touch by which she had assured herself that it hung about her neck,

and something that was the nearest to a sob that he had ever know strangled his breath.

Twenty seconds later, from a bank behind the buildings, Yen Sung dropped stealthily into the narrow lane and began to run. One possible hope had flashed across his mind. In following the road to Overbury Edith would have to make a detour of half a mile in order to cross the River Aish by the bridge at Rockford; there was, indeed, no other way. By taking to the fields, wading the Aish, and striking the high-road at its nearest point, Yen Sung hoped just to intercept her.

He was under no delusion. To the plain warning of the doctor he added—or perhaps took them as intermingling in the scheme of destiny—the supernatural terrors of the day, and with dispassionate fatalism he bowed acquiescently. The extent of his hopes was that he might be permitted to reach his revered one before the vengeance of the furies caught him or his earthly powers failed. Under ordinary conditions the race was not a hopeless one—three fields, the river, and, beyond, a strip of meadow, lay between him and the high-road; but his heroic heart was chained to a slight and crippled frame. Already the rain, now descending in torrents, had soaked him to the skin and the sodden clay of the ploughed land hung in great clods about his feet. He beat his way through the hedges, but the thorns and brambles tore him through his thin clothes as though with hooks, and very soon he found with dismay that he could only stumble blindly forward with half-bent knees. All his life he had believed in demons, and now to justify his faith, they came in their legions to mock and thwart him. Some drove barbs into every tingling joint, tore his unhealed burns with their talons, or turned the beating rain that fell upon his face into alternate ice and fire. Others, riding on the wind like drifts of smoke, surrounded him

in their endless circlings shrieking in his ears as they swept by. They made the earth heavy in his path, directed the rain into a denser volume where he was, knit the brambles together before him at each hedge, and impeded him in every way to an unending accompaniment of swirling, shrieking, riotous devilry. There were earth spirits, wind spirits, water spirits, fire spirits, and the outcast band. The accusing shadows of his ancestors walked by his side, desirous of arguing with him on many subjects, while the Great Dragon, floating above all, wrote unmoved with an iron pen upon a marble slate.

At the last hedge before the river he was blinded for the moment by a branch which slipped from his feeble grasp, and groping through he fell into a deep and thorny ditch. The myriads of spirits shrieked their mirth, and in his half-stunned confusion Yen Sung began painfully to climb back again up to the hedge through which he had just come. A little precious time was lost before he discovered his mistake and the fall had crippled him still further. The most gallant effort he could now call up was nothing but a shambling walk.

He reached the river, and would have stepped in, when the chain slipped from the twig upon which he had so far carried it, and fell into the grass. A few more steps and it would have been lost beneath the muddy waters of the Aish. At the cost of another delay he broke a willow branch and with a thread of linen from his hand he tied the cross to the thin end of the wand. Then using the butt to feel his way among the rock-strewn icy water, he stumbled to the other bank.

There was nothing now but the narrow strip of meadow, beyond which the highway marked his goal. Had his "high deities" determined to be kind? Perhaps; for suddenly the heavens opened above his head, the leaping flame caught the glittering emblem which he held

aloft, and, without the knowledge of a failure—grotesque but for its climax—to mock his eyes, Yen Sung sank straightway to the ground and reached a farther goal.

. . . . . .

There is very little to add to the story of his end.

The effect of lightning upon the object which it strikes is curious and diverse. Yen Sung supplied another instance of this purely scientific phenomenon, for when his body came to be unrobed, those who stood by were startled for the moment to see the perfect outline of a cross charged with three letters impressed with unmistakable clearness upon his breast.

At first it was intended that he should be buried in a secluded corner of the old churchyard at Overbury; but to many influential parishioners the thought of a pagan finding a resting-place within their hallowed "God's Acre" was repugnant. In the end a site deemed more suitable was found in a neighbouring cemetery, where he sleeps in an unconsecrated plot set apart for suicides and the unbaptised.

Hampton Hill, 1904.

XVII

Once in a Blue Moon

WITH the briefest of introductions, inasmuch as my part is only that of a listener and recorder, I may say that I had left Torford early one morning with the intention of walking some twenty miles and striking the railway again at Ashbridge. Provided with flask and sandwich box and trusting rather to the compass than to the roads, I was reconciled to the possibility of not meeting a human being from morning till night, but a darkening of the sky before the afternoon was far advanced warned me that I should soon be compelled to find a shelter or be drenched to the skin. Of stunted trees there was no scarcity, indeed, but the vivid flashes of lightning which now followed one another with an ever-diminishing interval dashed the thought of seeking such questionable protection. In despair I ran to the top of a small knoll near at hand, expecting at the best to discover a solitary cottage or a cowshed at no great distance. To my relief from this eminence I saw lying almost at my feet a tiny moorland hamlet nestling in a little valley and further concealed by its girdling fringe of oaks. The first house was an inn: I saw its swinging sign and stayed to see no more, for the next moment the deluge came and in the slashing pelt of the rain every vestige of the landscape melted out. I scrambled down the steep decline, took the lane in a few long bounds, and flung myself breathless into the welcome shelter of the nearest room.

Sudden thunderstorms may be classed among the misfortunes—if misfortune it be—that bring us strange companions. The room in which I found myself, for the outer door opened directly upon it, was apparently the only public apartment which the inn possessed, and as the inn was in turn the only one for miles around, the storm had indiscriminately swept into the limit of a few square yards a chance company which under more ordinary conditions would have been striking in its diversity.

On a bench which extended along one side of the room sat three aged rustics, all wearing the stout and fancifully embroidered smockfrock of the old-time peasant. In his left hand each held a staff upon which he leaned forward: a quart mug of cider occupied each right hand. Their names, I soon learned, were Richard, John and Jasper, but they called one another Urchid, Jan, and Jaffer. The only other occupant of the bench was a youth of studious, melancholy expression and neglected attire. In a city he might have passed at sight as an unsuccessful poet or an out-of-work valet grown slovenly in despair. Actually, he proved to be a harmless enough creature—the village idiot in fact.

I must also anticipate to describe the other occupants of the room. At a point farthest from the door sat an escaped convict, between two warders who had recaptured him on the moor half an hour previously. From a chair near the window an itinerant photographer regarded the weather gloomily. The inn-keeper, standing behind his bar, regarded the weather cheerfully; while two sportsmen who carried the accessories of a fishing expedition completed the tale. The face of one struck me from the first glance with elusive familiarity, but it was not until I heard him addressed by the other that I recognised the well-known democratic peer, Lord Twaddlemuch. His companion, who rode his chair at

an uneasy angle, proved to be an American millionaire, a gentleman known in his native land as the Tinned-rabbit King, I believe.

"To continue the analogy," the nobleman was saying as I entered, or rather he had said that much, but with the true platform instinct he obligingly repeated the remark for my edification, "To continue the analogy, the various kinds of fish which we pursue furnish exact parallels to the various temperaments into which Mr. Mollentrave, for instance, would classify women."

"Including the kinds of fish that pursue us, Earl?" observed the American millionaire, who did not appear to be treating the subject seriously. I knew him to be an American at once by the painstaking purity of his English accent.

"Urchid," said one of the rustics, delivering himself with an air of natural placidity that one would look for in an Alderney cow if it acquired the faculty of speech, "pass they gen'l'men thickey li'lle barr'l."

Thus instructed, Richard took from a shelf a miniature model of the ordinary hogshead, a felicitous utensil in which the farm labourer carries his day's allowance of cider. On it was neatly painted the following inscription:

FRATERNITY OF THE ELEVEN STREAMS

In order to promote harmonious social intercourse, diminish envy, and eradicate a fruitful source of contentious exaggeration, know all men that a fine of one penny is imposed upon any person who shall introduce into his conversation the word "fish" in any connection whatever within any place of public entertainment throughout the above limits; or who shall directly or indirectly refer to any aquatic creature coming within such designation, or who shall by sign, illustration,

spring-balance, yard measure, word, gesture, allegory, display of printed or written matter, or innuendo, convey such a reference or simulate a colourable imitation thereof; or who shall relate, cause to be related, or in any way publish, diffuse, or circulate any piscatory adventure, experience, incident, dream or prophecy or who shall attain such an end by any means not specifically expressed.

"The proceeds, I observe," remarked the American millionaire, reading on, "are to be devoted to improving the quality of native cider, by creating a larger demand. An interesting survival: take for two," and he dropped a half-crown into the barrel.

"With all deference to your ingenious classification, sir," remarked the itinerant photographer, turning to the earl, "my professional experience ranges me on the side of the aphorist who contended that a woman could be fitly compared to no other created thing—except any other woman."

"A similar remark might be applied with even greater accuracy to a Manx cat." It was the escaped convict who spoke.

"True," admitted the itinerant photographer: "the inference holds. Scratch the Woman and you find the Other Woman."

"Iv ee a-scradch my ode ooman," remarked Jasper thoughtfully, " 'twadn't be no huther ode ooman yeu would find but thickey same ode ooman—her what hat man auver drexil only two dree days ago."

"Hat man over drexil?" murmured the American millionaire to the room at large.

"Precipitated the speaker over his own doorstep," explained the village idiot courteously. "The 'man' is practically the equivalent of the colloquial 'one'; as you

might say, 'It really takes one's breath away,' meaning, 'It really takes my breath away.' "

"Thank you, sir," replied the American millionaire. "It really does."

The escaped convict laughed softly to himself. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, looking up, "but I was reminded of an incident connected with a woman and a dialect that struck me as being amusing at the time. Well, well, twenty years ago! How time flies—some time!"

"It is still raining," remarked his lordship. "Perhaps you would gratify our curiosity by relating the story."

"Story—hardly," apologised the escaped convict. "The merest outline of an incident; the gossamer cobweb of a memory. The heroine was called Amao."

"Christian or surname, might I inquire?" interposed the American millionaire. "Or perhaps a daisy play-name of your own?"

"Christian name and surname and all her name," replied the escaped convict severely. "That is, if a poor creature who was not a Christian and who probably had no recognisable sire could have either. As a matter of fact, with the exception of a delicate confection of nutmegs and sharks' teeth it was all in the world that she did have. She was a Polynesian and I found her in Jim Hartleigh's hut on Oahai shore. They told me that there was a white man down with the fever, and putting professional etiquette aside in the sacred cause of humanity (for I hadn't been really sent for), I went. There I found old Hartleigh—once something else of the Guards—bad, very bad, indeed. He knew me and lifted an eyelid and tried to wave a fraternal fin, but only got as far as a shiver. Well, I fixed him up and dosed him and then looked round. 'Now we must get him to drop off to sleep,' I said in native to Amao, hoping that she would

take the hint and go, for she dressed so loudly, what there was of it, that I didn't like to see her about the place. As I said, I had hoped that she would clear out, but I was surprised to see how tactfully she took it at once. She looked pensively doubtful for half a moment as though wondering whether it was quite right, then smiled acquiescently and picked up a war club to depart. That was my mistake. This was hers: the language in that island is very limited and one word has necessarily to carry several meanings. Thus 'sleep' is the same as 'insensibility,' both really meaning 'half-dead,' and the verb 'to drop'—their verbs have no conjugation, nothing beyond the bare outline—is 'to drop' in all cases: 'to sink,' 'to fall,' 'to fell,' 'to pole-axe,' and so on. You see what happened? Amao, who really was passionately devoted to Jim, actually thought that I said, 'Now we must knock him insensible,' and having a blind faith in my medicineman-ship, and coming of a race which leans towards drastic remedies, she straightened herself up and did it as neatly as an arch-druid might have done before I could raise a finger. You see, very simple and very natural, but it just shows."

"And Jim Hartleigh?" inquired one. "Did he die?"

"No, sir," replied the escaped convict blandly; "he did not. He remained insensible for thirty-six hours and then got up perfectly recovered and married Amao—Polynesian rites, of course, but very swell affair. I danced for three days, wearing a rope of lotus blossom sixteen yards long. Well, well: what blind gropers we men of science are in the stupendous laboratory of Nature's infinite possibilities."

" 'Tes wonnerful beyond all imagining the power of language he du have," remarked Jan.

"Ev there be one word 'n dree understandable to us common fellows it be as much," agreed Jaffer.

"Fvine," assented Urchid, sucking contentedly at his pipe and speaking with the air of a connoisseur.

"It's a fact," said the itinerant photographer reminiscently, "that the exact end-up with which an idea will appeal to a woman is not worth speculating about. On some subjects they have no focal length, so to speak. In my native town there was a prepossessing young lady of seventeen called Irene Violet Maud who suffered extraordinarily from dyspepsia. Her mother took her to a doctor who talked to her all about the subject, explained to her what to do and what not to do, and told her as a particular thing to rest awhile and take it easy after every meal. Now Irene knew that she had indigestion badly and knew that she felt better if she did as he had told her, but because the man had red whiskers and she had wanted to be taken to a certain doctor with a black silky moustache and liquid eyes, she made a point of running briskly up and down three flights of stairs seven times without stopping after breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner and supper. In consequence she's a bit of an apparition now, but when a friend reminded her of those skittish times recently, Irene said that it served Mr. Red Whiskers very well right and she would do it again if there was any occasion."

"Your country has produced some remarkable types, sir," suggested one of the prison warders agreeably, turning to the Tinned-rabbit King.

"Red Indians and—well, buffaloes one used to hear talk of," volunteered the second prison warder with conscious diffidence.

"Why certainly, sir, we have our share," admitted the American millionaire with bluff good-humour. "As far as that goes, there was my own aunt Janet now, as resourceful, matter-of-fact kind of woman, who would shoot a horse-thief in the morning, darn her father's

socks in the afternoon, and be the belle of the ball in the evening, as you would meet anywhere. I'm speaking of the 'forties now, when she and my grandfather lived in a bit of roughish country down Arizona way. However things had happened Janet had always found that she could make them straight and tidy, until John Baxter Green began to court her. It wasn't that she had any objection to Baxter; quite the opposite, in fact, but the young man was so eternally shy and mistrustful that no amount of encouragement seemed to help him along. At the end of six months, after seeing her every other day on an average, he once ventured to press her hand after bringing her home from a camp meeting, but he got so scared at his boldness that he stayed away from chapel for the next two Sundays. In the second year of their acquaintanceship he accidentally let a 'Janie' slip out and she never caught sight of him for a whole week in consequence. There was no reason on either side why they should not make up and get married within a month, but Janet was mortal sure that if ever he got so far as to give her a kiss he would leave the States for Europe the next day. I don't deny that she was a bit huffed privately at his style, allowed that it did not argue well for the future, and so forth maybe, but she had settled definitely on Baxter, and being a plain, sensible girl she knew that she could not have everything and that there was a quantity of worse faults. However, her father, who was an old-timer, had other ideas. Not that he disliked Baxter either, but he had been a brisk, lively man in his own time and he had notions as to how things ought to be done.

"'Look here, Janet,' he said one day, 'this has been going on for a matter of well over a twelvemonth now and I have no mind to see a daughter of mine trifled with.

Is there anything definite fixed up between you and Baxter yet?'

" 'Not exactly definite perhaps, popper,' replied Janet, combining truth and prudence as she always contrived to do. 'Mr. Green is like old Rock—slow but steady.'

" 'Well, I'm thinking of having the old horse shot before long, for that matter,' he replied thoughtfully. 'That's not the point, however. What I'm going to say is this. Young Matt Henrick has been talking to me a sight about you lately, and the two ranches lie mighty convenient. I don't deny that I'm willing to make considerable allowance for your own feelings, but in reason the thing can't go on for ever. When do you expect to see Baxter again?'

" 'He talked of dropping in to supper on his way back from Sweet Spring to-morrow,' replied the girl.

"Old Saunders nodded. 'That fits in all right,' he said. 'That new Cantonville minister is coming round to supper to-morrow night also. I'll tote across and ask Matt as well. We'll chance in towards eight o'clock. Then if you and Baxter have fixed things up the minister can say the word; if not, well, the minister will be here all the same and you must put up with Matt. Now run and find me my tobacco-pouch; I put the plaguey thing down somewhere not five minutes ago and it's clean gone.'

"It was rather sudden even for out West in the 'forties, but although an indulgent parent in general, old Saunders had a way with him when he meant a thing. Anyhow, the new minister was coming to supper, so Janet went about seeing that everything should be ready.

"About seven o'clock the next evening Baxter put in an appearance. No one was about but Janet and she was busy in the parlour. Baxter found the room half full of old trunks and boxes, Janet very industriously

covering them with shiny black cloth. It improved their appearance considerably.

" 'Sakes, Miss Janet,' he said, 'whatever in the world are you doing? You're not getting ready for a journey, surely?'

" 'Perhaps I may be going one shortly,' replied Janet ambiguously. 'Anyway I had the idea to do up these old boxes while I thought of it. I'm sticking on this cloth and then I shall finish it off with a row of brass nails.'

" 'It's the cutest scheme out; makes them look quite new,' he said admiringly. 'Let me help you.'

" 'Certainly you can, if you don't mind stickying your hands,' she said. 'I have an old recipe for making this gum and it is better than anything one can buy. The only trouble is that it dries so quickly that you have to work straight ahead as fast as you can and never mind about your fingers.'

"Baxter made a suitable reply, to the effect that his hands were like the school birch-rod—for use, not for ornament—and fell to work.

"Under her directions he used scissors and paste-pot unremittingly for half-an-hour and then that part of the task was done. Janet's warning had not been uncalled-for; his hands were plentifully smeared with gum, his fingers clung together. The girl herself was in an even worse plight, but half-a-dozen very respectable-looking travelling boxes were ranged before them.

" 'It's a great comfort to have enough room for things when you're packing,' she remarked. 'Before, I should not have known what to do for trunks, I'm sure.'

"Janet setting out with all the preparation for a long absence seemed to take a more concrete form in Baxter's imagination. 'Is it any particular journey you have in mind?' he asked anxiously.

"'Well, Aunt Mary has been asking me to go and stay with her over the winter for two or three years now,' she replied reflectively. 'She thinks that it must be dull for a girl here always and they have pretty lively times over there.'

"Baxter did not doubt it, and the thought made him extremely uncomfortable. Aunt Mary lived in a town a full week's journey away. She had sons; inevitably the sons had friends. It was bad enough to keep away from Janet in an agony of self-torturing diffidence, but for Janet to be a week's journey off, surrounded by smart city beaux and forgetting Creek Fall in a continual round of city gaiety, was unsupportable.

"'Say, Janet——' But Janet said nothing. On the gentleman's side it was certainly one of those occasions when silence is not golden, but Baxter got no further. Nevertheless, with bold abandonment he seized her hand as it lay irresistibly near his own, and then, as she manifested no inclination to run away, he possessed himself of the other and held them fast.

"For perhaps two whole minutes the world stood still. To an outsider the situation required no words, and certainly none were spoken; Baxter even at that moment could not key himself up to the pitch of saying what he wished to say, while Janet sat with quiet, surrendered hands, and face half turned away.

"At the end of those two minutes Baxter's fatal diffidence again possessed him. He thought that he had better go home at once and leave Janet to think things quietly over before they were both committed to an almost irrevocable step. He would have gone, and she, with the unconquerable modesty of the true American maiden, even in a Western State in the 'forties, she could have spoken no word to hold him though her heart was breaking. Doubtless he would have kept away for a

month; it little mattered how long if he was away when Matt Henrick and the minister arrived, as arrive they would in the next few minutes. She could speak no word if silence killed her, but the genius of a nation destined to the myriad achievements of ingenuity was dancing through her eyes. The gum, her gum, was all she claimed it to be. That two minutes' dalliance on Baxter's part was just enough to develop its adamantine qualities. Briefly, John Baxter Green, squeezing her hands in his, *could not go!*

"When this remarkable situation dawned upon the embarrassed young man he tried gently to disengage himself, of course without success. Then he tried somewhat harder, then very much harder until Janet gave a little scream. Finding that these efforts did not produce the least effect towards his release he looked helplessly round the room and murmured, 'Well, I swor!' softly beneath his breath.

"So far Janet had been as patient as mortal woman could be. 'You must release me before father comes in, Mr. Green,' she said gently at this point. 'He will be back towards eight o'clock with some neighbours, I expect, and whatever would they think if they found us like this?'

"Baxter was not really a coward when he had to do with men and he had a high esteem for old Saunders, but the thought of meeting him in the circumstances drove him nearly frantic.

" 'Release you!' he exclaimed. 'Oh, George Washington! I only wish I could, Miss Janet. What melts this blame stuff, anyhow?'

" 'I don't think that anything short of half-an-hour in hot water would do it,' she replied. 'And it would have to be very hot indeed, pretty near boiling.'

"Baxter was pretty nearly that as it was. 'Come

along, then,' he said heroically. "I'll put my hands underneathmost and perhaps it will soak through to yours without hurting you.'

"He had only half grasped the real inwardness of the position. Two heads may be better than one, but four hands, if inexorably held together at every point by Janet's special gum, are almost worse than none. If you are in doubt about this, take a lady's hands firmly in your own and then without liberating a finger try to manipulate a rather awkward door-handle. You might as well try with your head."

No one ventured to dispute this statement as the narrator paused. Jaffer, indeed, went so far as to corroborate it, for chancing to meet the American millionaire's eye he nodded sagely and murmured, " 'Tes true," with the air of one who had recently been in a similar dilemma, while further witness was dutifully supplied by Jan and Urchid.

"So 'tes," assented Urchid.

" 'Tes so," agreed Jan.

"Escape by the window was as impossible as by the door," continued the speaker, "and the chimney could not occupy a serious thought. With a survey of the room the truth dawned on Baxter; he was as effectually a prisoner as if a chain had bound him to the floor.

" 'However can I meet my father?' exclaimed Janet, and she threw up her arms in despair; and being what is termed a fine, strapping young woman she also threw Baxter up somewhat.

"The young man had no suggestion to make. The same speculation from his own point of view was engrossing his attention also.

" 'If I were a man,' said Janet with a great show of scorn, 'I'd do something before I would see a girl made ridiculous in the way I shall be.'

" 'Tell me what you would do,' replied Baxter reasonably, 'and I'll do it.'

" 'I don't know,' said Janet. 'But I would cut off my two hands rather than do nothing.'

"Baxter was fairly patient and certainly long-suffering, but he looked at things with the plain horse-sense of the male creature. 'What the plague good would that do?' he demanded warmly. 'I should be no sprier at opening doors without hands, and as far as ridiculous goes you certainly wouldn't be a cent more dignified with my hands hanging on to yours. Besides, how are you going to cut them off in the first place?'

"Janet shook her head dumbly. It was pretty nearly the only thing she could shake without feeling absurd.

" 'Now if only we were engaged,' continued Baxter with a ghastly attempt at airiness, 'and the minister was coming to marry us, we might just stand up as we are and the thing would pass off as natural as could be.'

"The footsteps of three sounded on the path outside. Janet turned a bright and affectionate eye on the young man at her side. 'He *is* coming,' she said, and stood up."

"Is that the end of it?" demanded the itinerant photographer as the American millionaire rose to look out of the window.

"It is the artistic end," he replied. "They were married, of course, and lived happily ever afterwards."

"You don't say how they managed when it came to putting the ring on," remarked the second prison warder, with some dissatisfaction.

"That is one of the many details left to the imagination," replied the narrator good-humouredly. "I might add, however, that they put Janet's gum on the retail market under a fancy name and made a considerable fortune out of it."

"Gentlemen," said the village idiot, suddenly and unexpectedly, "I have listened to your various stories with great interest, recognising in them sincere if unconscious contributions towards the elucidation of the Eternal Problem. My own life, as you may imagine, is circumscribed and moves completely in a groove, so that, like our friend the knife-grinder, of familiar quotation, 'I have no story.' There is, however, a trifling reminiscence connected with my very early days which I will venture to relate, in the hope that he who otherwise on some future occasion might run, may perhaps, instead, remain.

"My father was a professor of elocution, my mother the daughter of a country clergyman. The nature of the man was romantic, impractical and ambitious; that of the woman narrow and commonplace. On the eve of their wedding day they stood together on the shore of one of the most beautiful bays of this richly-endowed coast, watching the play of the moonlight upon the rippling water—a time and a situation well calculated to bring out, one must admit, all that was stirring and impassioned even in the most sluggish nature. Under the various influences my father's characteristics rose to their highest pitch, and casting all reserve to the winds in the assurance of a responsive sympathy he thus delivered himself:

" 'Christabel,' he said, 'I have a feeling, amounting to a most inspired conviction, that I am destined to some great future. Hitherto there has been one thing lacking to fire an ambition that is as illimitable as the space above us, as sure and resistless as the tides beneath. That incentive has been supplied by the magic touch of your proud love, and in that golden future it is only fitting that you should have an equal part. Say, then, to what pinnacles of supremacy your fancy turns? Do

you covet power? Then in some new and far-off region a gigantic empire shall be founded that will hail you queen. Riches? Such profusion shall be poured into your lap that the name of Crœsus shall wither off the records of the world like a poor and trivial thing. Fame? Then in poem and romance of unrivalled brilliance the name of Christabel shall be enshrined to receive the homage of a thousand generations long after the glories of Petrarch's Laura and Dante's Beatrice have faded from the memory of the age. Ask what you will that I may set the seal of an inviolable promise to your wish.'

"She did not chide him for his reckless flights. She looked thoughtfully out across the splendour of the restless water, seeing dimly, he thought, some faint mirage of those purple visions.

" 'Well,' she admitted at length, 'there is one thing certainly that I have always set my mind upon. Promise me, dear, that when we do get a house we shall have venetian blinds—to the front windows, at all events.'

"This palpably inopportune request suddenly revealed to my father, as by a providential flashlight, the utter incongruity of their minds. What prospect of true happiness could he reasonably anticipate when every detail of their lives was antagonistic—his romances bound to her venetian blind cords, his empires brought into line with the restricted vision from her front windows? The newspapers of that period were devoting pages to the views of countless well-meaning people who had discovered marriage to be a failure, who had come to the conclusion that their partners were thriftless on the one side and piggish on the other, who had courageously argued to the conviction that they did not know what they believed in, but fancied that it was in nothing; the newspapers of that period were also devoting columns to reports of conscientious husbands and wives who mur-

dered each other, themselves and their entire families, in order to prove to the world at large how passionately and unselfishly attached they were to one another. These things passed quickly through my father's mind as he stood with his betrothed on their wedding eve beneath the gracious moon. A fearful abyss seemed to be instantly revealed about his feet. If he married her——? He took a sudden resolution. He did not marry her."

I imagine that the itinerant photographer dropped some extra sensitive plates. The first prison warder made an observation about the weather, the second one another about the time, and every other person present consulted his watch, looked eagerly out of the window or removed a quite unimportant speck of dust. Out of this conventional group stand Jaffer, Jan and Urchid, who sympathetically remarked:

"'Twan't right."

"'Twasn't."

"'Twadn't."

"It was, perhaps, rather late in the day to draw back, but doubtless my father applied to the case the specious reasoning of Tarquin. 'A little harm, done to a great good end,' and really did convince himself that in the long run less suffering would be inflicted upon Christabel than if she was tied for life to one who, he candidly admitted to himself, would develop into a very objectionable character under her cramping influence. The marriage was to have been a runaway one: in fact they had already run away, and the ceremony had only been postponed from day to day through some mistake in fulfilling one of the necessary formalities. Acting upon his resolve my father now ran away still further, leaving behind him a note in which he frankly explained his position.

"The result of his decision was unfortunate for myself.

My mother introduced an unforeseen influence into the situation by losing the balance of her mind. Standing with me in her arms upon the anniversary of that ill-fated day, upon the same haunted spot on the coast, she flung out her hands with a gesture of passionate renunciation. I was necessarily included in the gesture, and chancing to alight head downwards upon a boulder of Cornish granite I became what I now am."

"My good fellow," exclaimed the well-meaning earl kindly, "you underrate your capabilities, I am sure. I have some slight influence in Whitehall; if a minor post in the Reconstruction Office——"

The village idiot shook his head with a grateful smile. "I thank you, but you are mistaken, my lord," he replied firmly. "This coherence is only spasmodic. During storms such as the one we have just witnessed I am always subject to fits of sanity. The condition is brought about by the excess of electricity in the air, I imagine, and would doubtless offer a fascinating field for experiment to the specialist. But, as I have said, the phenomenon is only temporary, and already the storm seems to be over——"

It was as he said. Looking through the doorway I saw blue sky among the clouds, though a thin aftermath of rain still drifted in the air and the gutters by the road still poured like open sluices. Birds that had roosted at the approach of the unnatural gloom were again venturing forth and the dripping trees were sparkling beneath the reappearing sun.

Within the room were the sounds of chairs pushed back and feet grinding upon the sanded floor. All were engaged upon departure. I stepped out into the moorland-scented air and without a word to any—for was I not but a listener and recorder?—I resumed my journey.

At the point where the road passed behind the knoll

I turned for a last look back. Before the rustic porch the itinerant photographer was endeavouring to arrange a group, but at the critical moment the village idiot persistently wandered out of focus. It was then I noticed for the first time that the inn sign was that of "The Blue Moon."

West Hampstead, 1902.

XVIII

The Marquise Ring

"AFTERNOON, Hink. Give my love to the dear Duchess of Dontcherknow, not forgetting little Lady Marjorie as well."

Mr. Hink walked out in dignified silence as no suitable retort occurred to him. They were a common lot of fellows with whom he had to associate at the shop, having no soul above the counter, and jealous of his obvious superiority. Early closing days found them preferring such plebeian resorts as Epping, or the Oval, to Hyde Park and the promenades of the West End. Mr. Hink went his own way, and after one or two unsuccessful attempts he tried no more to lead their footsteps into selecter paths. On the whole he was not sorry; such companions would have compromised his own appearance in the haunts of fashion.

Mr. Hink, it will be seen, had tastes above his station. Fate had cast him behind the retail counter and given him nothing in return but the doubtful admiration of the young lady in the cashier's box and thirty-five shillings a week. The congenial sphere, his proper place indeed, he felt sure would have been among the *haute monde*—to borrow a phrase frequently on his lips. He was getting on, too. Only three weeks ago had he not mingled with the brilliant throng at a hospital bazaar (closing day), and direct from the jewelled hands of the Countess of Camberwell received a cup of tea? Had he not, with easy grace, requested the Lady Sybil to put in another piece of sugar, and when that astute

maiden had complied and coquettishly demanded an additional sixpence for the same, had he thought the coin ill spent?

He decided to go into Hyde Park and watch the carriages for an hour. He was confident of recognising some leaders of society; it was an occupation in which he had found much satisfaction.

"Excuse me, governor," said a voice at his elbow, "but could you kindly tell me what a marquis's ring is like?"

Mr. Hink turned sharply. A very shabby, questionable-looking individual had taken a seat upon the same form, and was looking up from a copy of the *Morning Post* which he held.

Mr. Hink did not like shabbily dressed people, nor was he disposed to enter into conversation with questionable-looking men. He had a high idea of his own astuteness and never listened to the simple wayside tale. But only that morning a workingman, in asking him the time, had addressed him as "mate," and now to be called even "governor" by a person who plainly looked up to him, was some emollient. Further, the clean new copy of the paper in the ragged man's hands, and the inquiry itself, stirred his curiosity.

"Marquise, you mean, don't you?" he said. "A marquise ring."

"Marquise it is, I daresay," replied the other, "but I'm not much of a reader myself." He passed the newspaper to Mr. Hink, indicating a certain spot where the following advertisement appeared:—

"TWENTY POUNDS REWARD

"Lost between Belgrave Square and Hyde Park or in the Park, a diamond (10) and ruby (12) marquise

ring, with pearl centre. The above reward will be paid to the finder on returning the ring to 55, Belgrave Square, S.W."

"Well," remarked Mr. Hink jocularly, after looking at the date of the paper and seeing that it was that day's, "you may be in time yet. I should go and have a look for that twenty quid if I were you."

The shabby man made no reply, but folding the paper looked away into the distance with a somewhat cryptic expression that roused Mr. Hink's curiosity all the more. What did it mean—the question put to him, the clean new paper in the hands of a tramp, and that quiet, half-amused little smile?

"Look here," he said sharply; "what are you driving at? You haven't—you don't mean to say that you've *found* it?"

"Governor," replied the man with simple candour, "whether I've found it or not I don't know, but I've found something. I shall have to trust someone, and it may as well be you." With these words he took a dirty screw of paper out of a pocket, and unwrapping it placed a marquise ring of dazzling brilliance in Mr. Hink's hand.

"Of course it's it," said that gentleman after a single glance. "Any cuckoo could see that. Look here; ten diamonds, there they are; twelve rubies, pearl centre."

"So they are, governor, if you say so," said the tramp, replacing the ring in its covering and returning it to his pocket. "But strike me clean if I could tell a ruby from a radish."

"Well," said Mr. Hink enviously, "you are in luck! My godfathers, but you are!"

The man in luck favoured him with a half-bitter, half-pitying smile. "So it seems," he replied; "but when I

went to Sunday-school, a good many years ago, I remember a bit out of a book, 'Things are not always what they seem.' Do you think," he went on with a sudden passionate vigour, "that if a bloke like me went up to that toff's house I should ever see the beginning of those twenty thick uns? Garn!"

"How do you make that out?" demanded Mr. Hink.

"I walked past the house half-an-hour ago and see two of them bloomin' yellow-'ammers 'oppin' about the 'all door. If I go do you think that the noble toff what lives there will receive Bill Humphreys in his front drorin'-room? Rats! Them same yellow-claws will possess themselves of this bauble and then chuck me out into the road and call the police if I don't go quiet."

"Well, let them," said Mr. Hink, urging defiance. "You'd be on the right side. You've got nothing to be afraid of the police for."

"That I most particularly have," replied Mr. Humphreys fervently. "It's only a small matter of leaving a wife and family chargeable to the parish, but if it's a question of calling in the police I emphatically do not wish to be there."

"Oh!"

"It's quite right, governor," said the other pensively, "and to a gentleman and a man of the world I do not hesitate to admit the fact. Why, just before I spoke to you I was half on my way to chuck the bloomin' thing into the Serpentine to save being got into any trouble through it. Straight I was."

"What, throw twenty pounds away!" exclaimed Mr. Hink, aghast. "You must be going light-headed through sudden joy. How did you come to find it?"

"I was walking along there," pointing towards Stanhope Gate, "this morning, when I chawnst to see something among a swept-up heap o' dust. I picked it out

and it was a glove, what you might call a young lady's glove by the littleness of it. Then as I held it—without ever thinking of looking inside, you understand—I felt something 'ard, and there it was, down a finger. There may be somethin' 'anging to this, I thought to myself, so I went along to the reading-room down Holborn. Took me a long time to find that reward, too, for knowing that it must have been lost yesterday I started with the *Star* and such like."

"Shows what a mug you must be," commented Mr. Hink with condescending familiarity. "You might have known to look first in the *Morning Post* for anything connected with society."

"*You* might," agreed the other with simple faith. "That's where you have the head of me in a business like this, throughout. Well, I did find it, howsoever, and I bought one, so as to have it, you see. Then I made my way to that address, and at the sight of it my 'art felt like four-ale what's been left out overnight."

"Did you happen to keep that glove?"

Mr. William Humphreys felt leisurely first in one pocket and then in another. Yes, he had happened to keep it, though evidently without attaching any importance to it, and finding it he handed it over for inspection. Plainly it had scarcely been worn, and, except for the dust still clinging to it, it was yet clean and dainty. Belgrave Square! Mr. Hink took it almost reverentially, and felt convinced, in spite of its temporary contamination, that he could detect a faint aristocratic perfume lingering even then. "Size six-and-a-half," he remarked. "Made in Paris. Soft as velvet and fragrant as a rose. Ah! it wouldn't need any more than this to tell me the class we're dealing with."

"You're right all along, governor," said the tramp admiringly; "but it knocks *me*."

"Here, what did you say the address was?" exclaimed Mr. Hink, on another thought. "55, Belgrave Square! Why, that's the Earl of Saxmundham, the father of the Ladies Irene and Gladys Felix-Toft, the two great beauties of the season. And this is the glove of one of them, and the ring! I see exactly how it happened. Driving in the Park yesterday in their victoria, the Lady Irene or the Lady Gladys for some purpose takes off her glove and lays it for a moment on her lap. Then it slips unnoticed among the folds of the rug. A movement, and it is thrown unseen into the roadway, to be swept aside by a dustman and picked up by you. Oh, my aunt! Why is luck parcelled out in slabs to the unworthy?"

"Like a book," murmured Mr. Humphreys with quiet enthusiasm. "Like a bloomin' book, throughout."

Neither spoke again for a few moments. "What you need," at length remarked Mr. Hink, looking sideways, "is a reliable intermediary to carry through the affair for you."

"A smart, upstanding, dressy nob," agreed the one of the two who certainly was not "dressy." "A social equal, so to speak, who could go up to the front door and say, without any this or that, 'My business is with the earl, forthwith.' Perhaps even produce his card if there was any hank."

Mr. Hink had cards. He possessed a shilling complete guide to etiquette, and knew exactly what to do if he attended a levee or found a member of the Royal Family among his guests at dinner. The cards were strictly on the lines laid down, with the exception of a slight economy effected by using imitation copper-plate. "I'll tell you what," he said. "Make it a deal and I'll go myself."

"Governor," replied Mr. Humphreys, after a rather

awkward pause, "I won't say that the idea hadn't occurred to me also."

"Well," urged Mr. Hink, as the other again relapsed into a tranquil silence. "What's the matter with it?"

"When I found that ring," said the tramp impressively, "I didn't think much, either one way or the other; but when I read that in the paper I felt for the moment that there wasn't no holding myself in. Then I saw the house and so on, and reviewed my past life and future prospects. 'It's no go, Bill,' I says and I was clean doused. Now meetin' you has put fresh 'art into me, but, sooner than act the jay and lose it all, I'd chuck it straightway into the Serpentine and walk away, hungry and ill-clad, blind my blinkers if I wouldn't!"

"What's the talk about losing it?" demanded the gentleman indignantly. "D'ye think I'd run off with it?"

"No, governor, I don't. Because, for that matter, I should walk with you as far as the door. But how do I know who you are? How do I know that you aren't 'and in glove with the toff at that address? You've got all the style of it, and you seem to know who he is. Where should I be if you went in and didn't come out again; or, being a friend of his, got him to let you out by the back door?"

"I don't know him, reely I don't," protested Mr. Hink earnestly. "I'd act the fair thing."

"No offence, governor," replied the tramp; "but there's no denying that oncet you go inside with the ring you've got the whip 'and of me, so to speak, and my little all goes with you. Share and share alike is my idea—but no. Without any ill-will, governor, it'd be too bitter."

The bitterness was already overflowing from Mr. Hink's cup. Ten pounds, and the Earl of Saxmundham, with, possibly, a graceful word to the Lady Irene or the

Lady Gladys! "I'll tell you what," he said desperately. "You shall come on and stand in fair sight of the house all the time, only don't make yourself too conspicuous. Then I've got a matter of two pounds that you can have now, in advance."

"It's off," replied the other shortly. "Off without any mutual offence. I've thought of another way. There's an old Mo. what I know of, and although he mayn't give more than five or six quid as the breaking-up value, what it is 'ull be sure."

"Sure!" groaned Hink, "what can be surer than the money I put right into your hand?" He took out his purse and counted the contents. There were the thirty-five shillings which he had that day received, and, being a careful, prudent soul, almost two sovereigns more. "Here's nearly four pounds, and six more the minute I come out of the house. Don't stand in your own silly light."

"I don't like it, straight I don't," said Mr. Humphreys, frankly; "but you have a trustful face. There's twenty quid on the one side unless this earl has gone broke in the meanwhile, and what on the other? Well, throw in your watch and chain and that pin you're wearing, if it is to be, and remember that we've both 'ad a mother wonst."

Mr. Hink would have protested strongly against making the acquaintance of an earl, and possibly other members of the noble family, in so unadorned a state, but a symptom of restlessness on his companion's part was sufficient to reduce him to immediate compliance, and after making the exchange they walked—the ragged man, by arrangement, a few yards behind—to Belgrave Square.

Mr. Hink had a firm theoretical belief in the policy of honesty—nor did it seem probable that a request to

be let out by a back way after he had received the reward would work very satisfactorily, apart from the indignity of such a proceeding. But as he walked to Belgrave Square there was one glorious vision that for a moment tempted him. If only—but in view of the fact that all his available money, to say nothing of the other articles, was sunk in the venture, it was a very formidable "if only"—if only he was in a position to hand over the jewel to the Lady Irene or the Lady Gladys and lightly brush away the suggestion of a reward, begging her to treat the incident as the willing service of a gentleman to a lady, to what might it not lead? A graceful letter of thanks at the very least—permission to call?—an invitation to lunch? The possibilities were more dazzling than the glitter of the marquise ring when flashed in the sunlight; but, the empty purse, the empty coming week. That vision had to fade.

The earl was at home and a footman took the proffered card, but Mr. Hink did not like his manner. He did not like the way he looked at him, he did not like the way he looked at the card, less still did he like the way he told him to wait in the hall, and when he returned and asked Mr. Hink's exact business, that gentleman positively disliked him.

"Have the goodness to inform his lordship," he replied with becoming haughtiness, "that I have called in connection with his advertisement in the *Morning Post*, and that I must hand over the ring to him personally."

This had the desired effect, and it is to be placed on record that the ring gained for Mr. Hink the happiness of seeing and conversing with the Right Hon. the Earl of Saxmundham for at least five minutes, although the expression of felicity can only be accepted in a courtesy sense. His lordship came into the hall and invited Mr. Hink to follow him into his study. Furthermore, to Mr.

Hink's way of thinking the noble lord did not look like an earl, did not speak like an earl, and certainly was not dressed like an earl.

"What is it you wish to see me about. An advertisement? Some mistake, surely."

"The ring, you know, my lord," prompted the caller. "The ring advertised for—which I have in my possession."

The earl took the newspaper and read the advertisement. "A mistake, evidently," he said, with no pretence of being interested, and he actually looked as though he expected the young man to leave at once.

"But, my lord," protested Mr. Hink, "doubtless the ring is the property of the Lady Irene or the Lady Gladys, who have not yet informed you of their loss."

"My daughters do not wear rings of that description," and the words and the look accompanying them were as coldly aristocratic as Mr. Hink could wish for even from a duke.

"Then some inferior member of your household," was the hopeful suggestion, somewhat blankly given. "Surely your lordship will not object to have inquiry made in so important a matter."

The inquiry was made with no satisfactory result, and the end of it found the earl and Mr. Hink looking rather awkwardly at one another, neither quite knowing the terms on which to reopen the conversation.

"I can only suggest," remarked the earl languidly at last, "that possibly a printer has made a mistake in the address. It might be worth your while to go to the office of the paper."

"I will certainly do so," replied the young man, "and I am grateful to your lordship for the idea. It is highly necessary for me to find the owner soon, as, unfortu-

nately, I advanced every penny I had with me to the finder."

"Oh," said the earl, looking at Mr. Hink with a slight access of interest. "I understood that you had found it yourself. Might I be permitted to see the ring for a moment?"

It was permitted with alacrity, and anxious to afford a clue to the Lady Irene or the Lady Gladys even at this eleventh hour, Mr. Hink launched into a full account of the whole transaction.

"I am afraid, my good fellow, that you have been imposed upon," said his lordship, when he had listened patiently. "The particular operation is, I believe, known as 'telling the tale.' The ring is merely a flashy imitation and practically worthless."

"What, 'telling the tale'!" exclaimed the unhappy dupe, scarcely able to realise the possibility. "To me! D'ye mean to say that I've been 'ad?" The upheaval of his feelings may be gathered from the fact that in conversation with a peer of the realm he actually allowed himself to say "'ad!"

"If you left anything of value with the man it certainly looks as though you have been had," replied the earl, not without a sense of placid enjoyment.

"Three pounds seventeen and nine, a watch and chain and a gold horseshoe pin," enumerated Mr. Hink. "But the whole thing seems impossible, my lord," he cried, anxious to convince himself. "The matter came about quite naturally, without any pressing on my part—in fact, he did not wish me to come."

"That is the way it is generally worked, I have observed."

"But the glove, you forget the glove." He almost implored the earl to reconsider his opinion on the strength of the glove.

"What of that? There is no difficulty in buying a pair of lady's gloves, surely?"

"And the advertisement," continued Mr. Hink, still in a befogged frenzy. "The ring answers exactly to the description."

"I am afraid that you are rather a dense young man," said the earl impatiently. "The ring answers to the advertisement, of course, because the advertisement was written to fit the ring. For a few shillings it is as easy for anyone to send an advertisement to a paper as it is to buy a brass ring. But the glove—'m, yes; the glove was decidedly neat. I should prophesy that your friend has a career before him."

If any of "the fellows from the shop" had chanced to be in Belgrave Square a minute later they would certainly have had to admit, despite their general scepticism, that Mr. Hink was walking out of the Earl of Saxmundham's house by the front door. But on second thoughts Mr. Hink was not sorry to miss them at that moment, and, fortunately enough that chaste neighbourhood was quite deserted, for not even a solitary vagrant was then in sight.

Muswell Hill, 1900.

XIX

The "Dragon" of Swafton

A HUNDRED or more years ago it would have been a safe remark that no house seemed less likely to flourish than did the "Dragon" at Swafton. Situated under the southern slope of the Chiltern Hills it was, by that barrier, cut off from the high-road prosperity which flowed along the stage-coach routes from London to the north and the north-west; for the old Roman ways both to Chester and to York held to the east and all others avoided it on the west. Such custom as it obtained, therefore, was at the hands of the casual traveller across the shire and the chance wayfarer who elected to pass in at its open door. Nevertheless, the "Dragon" had its traditions of no mean order, and maintained ideals of hospitality which did not suffer by comparison with those of even the smartest of its more fortunate rivals.

At the close of a certain December day, more than a century ago, a very gay and light-hearted cavalier rode into the "Dragon" yard, and after giving sundry explicit directions about the care of his horse walked through the kitchen of the hostelry with the unhesitating step of one who was thoroughly familiar with the winding passages he trod. If Will Heron—to give him the name by which he was known in that part of the country at all events—rode a better mare than the rough work he evidently put her through and the long hours he kept the saddle called for, that was entirely his own affair. If the ostlers

and stablemen all along the roads paid him more attention than they would have given to a royal duke, and stabled his horse better than they would those of a judge on circuit, that may or may not have been owing to Will's careless liberality and his own easy personal qualities; at all events within the "Dragon" he was simply the unquestioned traveller who on many former occasions had won his way to their loyal admiration by his graceful courtesy, his gallant air and his ready and contagious smile.

Never did these amiable qualities seem more necessary than upon this occasion, for, on turning sharply at a right angle, Will came suddenly upon the usually placid hostess of the "Dragon" wringing her hands in a state of abject helplessness, while before her stood a frightened maid, who was evidently the bearer of tidings which had led to this unexpected state of distress.

"Oh, sir," she exclaimed, when she caught sight of Will, speaking in a whisper that the numerous doors around demanded—it seemed indeed as though she could have borne her calamities with fortitude if only she could have given unrestrained voice to them—"what a disgrace to happen to the 'Dragon'! Here is Sir Henry Verney and his lady just arrived and calling for dinner and there's not a thing in the house."

"What, nothing?" said Will in great concern. "Oh, surely there must be something that they won't mind putting up with."

"Not a thing," reiterated the lady dismally. "What ever will they say at the 'Cow' and the 'George' when this gets known?"

"But surely——" persisted Will.

"Six hours ago Robert started for St. Albans as soon as I knew Sir Henry would stop here. He must have broken down on the road, God knows where, for he ought

to have been back these two hours. A brace of chickens would have done, but the fox had the last of them yesterday. There was still a small shoulder of mutton in the house, and Sir Henry, none too pleased I thought, consented to make shift with that, and now, now," continued the unfortunate woman wringing her hands afresh, "Mary has just told me that the mutton has disappeared and a strange dog has been seen making out of the yard with something in its mouth."

"Oh, that's vastly awkward," said Will, hitting his boot with his riding-whip as though he might thereby drive an inspiration upwards. "Sir Henry has the reputation of an epicure, one hears."

"There's something even more unfortunate than that," whispered the hostess, drawing Will aside. They say that he has come about purchasing the Thornsby estate, and the 'Dragon' goes with it. Just now we—I—oh well, everyone will most likely know soon enough. Things have not been at their best of late——" Will nodded gravely—"fewer people have drawn up at the 'Dragon': you may have seen it"—again Will mutely assented—"and, in short, part of the rent has been left over for the last year or two. Our present landlord is easy-going and friendly, but if Sir Henry buys the estate and gets a bad impression of us from the start—well, you know how it will be."

Will pushed back his narrow-brimmed hat over his curls and pondered sagely. To help if possible in such a case came to him as naturally as did certain other instincts, less charming, and, when viewed through five or six score cold years, even forbidding. Frequently it had been his lot to assist fair ones out of the difficulties into which cruel fortune or their own indiscretion had led them, and to him, almost at first sight, they turned instinctively. Sometimes he fought, occasionally used

diplomacy and his own sweet persuasiveness; once, when both these means failed, he had even beggared himself for the time of all but his mare Cassandra. Greatly he preferred the first manner of settling all difficulties as they arose, but obviously he could not fight Sir Henry Verney because there was no dinner for him.

"Take me to the larder," he said after a few moments' desperate thought, "and let us trust that he may prove more of a gourmand than an epicure."

Whatever Will's forlorn scheme might be, the contents of the larder appeared to meet his requirements fully. With a decision that bore a suspicion of indifference he picked out one hopeless thing after another: the bones of a boiled fowl, a fragment of game pasty, the remnant of a mighty sirloin and a noble selection of condiments composed of every herb and spice which he could lay his hands upon. Over this unpromising collation he gave the half-laughing, half-crying but wholly docile landlady certain instructions in the art of simple cookery, drilled Mary for her unexacting part, and with a slightly more imposing swagger of hat and spur than he usually carried, marched into the large room where Sir Henry Verney and his lady awaited their dinner.

Inside, he swept off his hat and bowed with the courteous deference of a man who would crave permission to intrude where he has every right to be. Lady Verney was idly turning over the pages of a month old *Register* with no pretence of interest, and glancing at the gallant figure in the doorway bowed slightly in response; Sir Henry, who was dozing before the fire, pulled himself up in his chair and said ungraciously, "I understood, sir, that we were to enjoy the privilege of a private sitting-room."

"I am entirely at your command, sir," replied Will, smiling unabashed and advancing into the room. "It

so happens that at this season it is customary, it appears, to furbish up the 'Dragon' against the busy time which it enjoys in the spring, and from this cause all the other rooms are now in a state of uninhabitable confusion. This one is either private or public as the occasion demands, but if my presence is distasteful there is doubtless a fire and a chair in the kitchen where I——"

"Oh no!" cried the lady impulsively, while Sir Henry mumbled what passed for an assent, and again settled himself down to his nap. Bowing again with the ceremony which the occasion required, Will took his seat at a small table and turned to Mary, who had followed him into the room and now stood asking what he would be pleased to require for dinner.

"What should one require?" he replied sharply. "Have I not come fifteen miles out of my way over the most atrocious turnpikes south of Oxford to taste another Swafton pie? I gave my order to your mistress half an hour ago; since when has the 'Dragon' fallen to saving itself the trouble of making them by putting off its guests with readier fare?"

At these words Sir Henry betrayed signs of interest, and when the maid had left the room in evident confusion, he turned to Will with a much more conciliatory manner than he had yet displayed. "Sir," he remarked after a moment's hesitation, "I heard you refer just now to a Swafton pie, for which, I gather, this place is noted?"

"It is, sir," replied Will carelessly. "The Swafton pie of the 'Dragon' is considered by connoisseurs to be unequalled for delicacy of flavour and for the choice blending of ingredients."

"But, of course," remarked the lady, who was by no means desirous of being kept at a country inn so that her husband's palate might be satisfied, "one can easily obtain it elsewhere—in town."

"On the contrary, madam," replied Will, "not the two proverbial inducements of love and money could procure it even for you—so you see how impossible it then is. Not only do some of the essential flavouring herbs grow in Swafton alone, but there is a secret in the cooking which has been a 'Dragon' heirloom for generations."

"Why was this not——" began Sir Henry.

"It is a perverse and vexatious dish, taking the entire attention of one," suggested Will.

"Nevertheless, sir," cried the baronet, "it is infamous that I——"

"But if you would permit me to make a suggestion," continued Will, "I would venture to offer a solution. I have already trespassed upon your retirement: if you, sir, and your lady"—more elaborate ceremony—"would do me the honour of joining me and satisfying your natural curiosity I should be gratified beyond measure, and assured that I am not thrusting my company upon you. The Swafton pies, take my word, sir, are all royal in dimensions and this one will now be well upon its way."

Sir Henry hemmed once or twice and looked up; his wife smiled very faintly and looked down.

"Really, sir——" said the gentleman. "If you are quite sure, sir," murmured the lady.

Will did not wait for further encouragement; with the butt of his whip he struck the table soundly.

"Tell your mistress," he said when Mary appeared, "to remove from the oven everything that might possibly impair the flavour of the pie; also tell her that this lady and gentleman dine with me. The occasion demands the most scrupulous care," he added beamingly, turning to his guests.

It was several hours later when Will lifted himself into the saddle again after taking a half-mournful farewell of the lady and receiving a cordial one at the hands

of the baronet. The dinner had been an eminent success, for a December day's drive across the plains gives a healthy craving to even the most fastidious, and however remiss the larder of the "Dragon" may have been, its cellars and garden had proved themselves to be beyond reproach. Curiously enough, Mr. Heron's political views happened to coincide exactly with those of Sir Henry, and they applauded Fox and execrated the Alliance in harmonious unison. Furthermore, the emotions with which a man sits down to a denied repast are very different from those with which he would regard a humbly proffered dish of broken meat flavoured with herbs. Both Sir Henry and his wife declared enthusiastically that they had never tasted anything like it (which was more than probable), and thereat the blushing hostess had to present herself to receive their congratulations.

As Will cantered back along the road he had come a few hours earlier he turned half round to catch a glimpse of the lights behind him at the last point they showed upon his path. "Its own reward!" he murmured whimsically, repeating to himself the last gay words with which he had put aside the landlady's heartfelt thanks. And truly, when he came to reckon it up, his generous service and resource carried little to a material credit; for his timely rescue of the "Dragon's" honour cost Will Heron just two thousand guineas, that sum being the (unset) value of the diamond necklace which, as his information went, Lady Verney was carrying back to town with her.

The "Dragon" has long passed away, but before it sank into its final stage of senile decrepitude it enjoyed an era of prosperity which overshadowed all its former glories. Gradually it began to be known that at the "Dragon" of Swafton, and nowhere else, was to be obtained a certain pie of exquisite flavour and secret con-

diments. Sir Henry Verney carried the fame of them round about town and all the most celebrated cooks went to the "Dragon" in their spare time, unsuccessfully endeavouring to detect the wonderful herb to which the dish was said to owe its piquancy. When, in 1795, Pitt declared in the House of Commons that an apparently attractive measure brought forward hastily was "like a Swafton pie, which we are asked to swallow without full knowledge of its contents," the fame of the "Dragon" may be taken as at its zenith and its yard became a fashionable meeting-place for coach parties who had driven over from London and from Oxford. Tradition of the road asserts that the Prince fell an early victim to the appetising air from the hills and the flavour of the pie, and might be seen at least once a month driving Mrs. Fitzherbert thither in a curricle, but with mere rumour this narrative has no concern.

Sandgate, 1898.

XX

The Dream of William Elgood

HAD that ubiquitous individual, "the merest observer," been in Carston Cottage on a certain September morning, he could not have failed to notice that something unusual was passing in the mind of its owner, William Elgood, retired sea captain. It was not wonderful, therefore, that these signs forced themselves upon the attention of those who were best acquainted with the habits of Mr. Elgood, and his wife and daughter exchanged frequent looks of interrogation and surprise, though they refrained from making any comment, for, to tell the truth, the ex-captain of the *Petrel* had not a nature that invited confidence or sympathy, and had carried not a little of the manner of the forecastle into his own parlour.

Rousing himself from his reverie, and leaving his scarcely-touched breakfast, Elgood crossed the room and, after pausing before a framed chart that hung on the wall, he picked up his hat and went out, nor did his preoccupied look leave him till he had covered the mile that lay between Carston Cottage and Westport.

"Whatever can be the matter with your father this morning, Letty?" said the elder of the two ladies when they were alone, "he's scarcely touched his breakfast. He's been a little strange for the last two or three days. Can it be anything to do with Mr. Vernon?"

"Oh, mamma!" cried Letty, jumping up, "it was shameful the way father behaved the last time Mr. Ver-

non was sketching the ruins from the garden. You know he had *our* permission, at any rate, and he only came there because the view is better on this side—you can see quite a long piece of wall from behind the laurels, but from the field the ivy half hides it. And, then, to call Mr. Vernon a——oh, well, something nautical."

"Yes, dear, you know it always irritates William to see anyone earning a living in an easy way. He has had to work hard himself."

"But Mr. Vernon doesn't earn a living, mother. He said that he's never sold a picture yet, although he's always been very successful at getting them in a lot of exhibitions he told me about. And to think that father should say that he'd be doing more good tarring a rope!"

"I don't suppose that William really minded his painting, or being in the garden so much," sighed Mrs. Elgood, "but—well, you know, dear, he has been about here a good deal lately, and your father naturally thought that it was you, and not the ruin, that attracted him."

"*Me,* mother? Oh, mother, however could you imagine that? Indeed, I'm sure he never thought of me at all. Why should he? You don't really think that, do you?—it's only father. He's so ridiculous. Mr. Vernon cares for nothing but his art, I'm sure. Why, he even offered to teach me to sketch the other day; he thinks of nothing else, I believe."

"It is just as well," said her mother consolingly, "for of course he will not come here again now."

To this Letty made no reply. Perhaps the subject of Mr. Vernon was of less interest to her than the arrival of the postman, whom she ran out to intercept.

In the meanwhile the dissipator of this artistic idyll had reached the water-side, and, after a brief search, apparently found the object of his journey, who rose from the cabin of the *Nymph* in response to a stentorian

shout from the quay. Seeing Mr. Elgood, the captain of the *Nymph* waved a pleased and surprised greeting, and, after giving a few instructions, worked his way ashore and reached his friend.

"This is luck, seemingly," said Elwood, after they had shaken hands; "I was afraid that the *Nymph* would be out. How's Mrs. Timms and the family?"

"Very fit," replied Mr. Timms; "I was just thinking of going up to the house when you came. We got in on Tuesday night, and have scarcely finished unloading. You'd better come up with me; the missis was saying only yesterday that we didn't see anything of you now that you'd dropped anchor and become a gentleman."

"Don't think it, Ned," said the retired captain, hastily. "There's never any feeling of difference between us, I hope. Pals we've been, and will be to the end, if it rests with me."

The earnestness of Mr. Elgood's feeling appeared to surprise his companion a little. He was thinking perhaps, that since a recent and unexpected legacy, his old companion had not manifested any overwhelming desire for the company of his humbler friends.

"There's something I want to talk over with you, Ned," continued Elgood, after a pause. "It's better where we can be alone; come in here."

They turned into a small inn, which at that time of day was quite deserted. Elgood led the way into the remotest corner, and after calling for a glass of beer for his companion and a pipe for himself, began cautiously:

"This is a matter between ourselves, Ned," he said. "Take it or leave it, it goes no further. I must have your word for that."

Mr. Timms gave the required promise, and awaited Elgood's proposal with some curiosity.

"It's a matter that may be worth nothing or it may be worth thousands," continued the ex-captain, slowly. "It would be out of the way of some, and others would jump at the chance. I tell you that beforehand in case you think that I talked you over afterwards. It's not every man's cargo, and if so be as how you want to cancel beforehand, why——"

"Go on," said Timms. He was getting a little excited, and in any case he did not see why he should not hear all.

"It's a matter of a dream," said Elgood, who was becoming more and more constrained and emphatic as he neared his climax. "These three nights it's come to me, always the same. You know the coast by Sidcombe Point? Well, about two knots beyond the point there's a bit of a bay. I've often seen my grandfather point it out when I was a lad, and say that he'd had it from his grandfather that a Spanish ship had gone down there, full of gold; brought on to the rocks by wreckers, they did say. Anyhow, some of the crew got ashore with a lot of the money, and jewels as well. They buried it near, as deep as they could in the dark, wild night, and then had to fly for their lives. War broke out soon after that, and they had no chance of returning for it. The secret died with them, and to this day no one has ever seen a single piece of Spanish gold round there."

"I've often heard the same tale myself," said Timms; "it used to be common talk about here when I was young."

"There must be something in it, or it would never have been spoken of so much. Well, these three nights this has come to me: I was standing, leaning on a spade, at the foot of a single oak, growing by itself just outside a three-cornered wood above the bay. It was just as if I was going to begin digging, but each time I've woke then,

and with a voice ringing in my ears: *Dig here and the treasure will be found.* That's just what there is of it yet," he concluded, half-defiantly, "and now it's for you to say."

"What do you want me to do in it?" asked Timms cautiously. "You aren't offering me a share in whatever there may be for nothing."

"We've been pals, Ned," said Elgood reproachfully, "and you're the one man I could trust with a thing like this; besides, I should like to help you. Then, I've thought it over, and it seems to me that the only way it's to be done is to take a craft and get there at dark. If two or three men could bury whatever there is in a few hours, we can dig it up and get it aboard by morning and no one's likely to be about at that time. The *Nymph* will draw light enough without cargo to get a landing there."

"And who's to stay with her while we're away?"

"I never thought of that. Better take your lad with us. He'd be all right. Well, what do you say?"

"There's something powerful attractive both about dreams and buried treasure to a sailor-man," replied Timms thoughtfully; "I had an uncle who ran on to Walston Head following a dream, which so annoyed him that he never would believe in them again till he lost his boat through neglecting another. Yes, I'll go if it's share and share alike."

"Share and share alike it is," replied Elgood, and they shook hands on it and fell to arranging details.

The following day, at about four o'clock, the *Nymph,* with a crew of only two men and a boy, cast off from the quay and stood down the Channel. At ten o'clock in the evening she brought-to slowly in a secluded creek, and the two adult members of her crew waded ashore, each carrying a spade and a mattock. On reaching the

higher land beyond the bay, Timms uttered a word of disappointment. It was almost dark, but there was still a faint light-line on the horizon, and against this, as far as the eye could reach, there was not a sign of a wood or even a solitary tree; it was all open moorland, with a thick undergrowth of brushwood. He looked at his companion inquiringly.

"You are the only man I'd trust on an errand like this, Ned," said Elgood, "but I thought it better to alter the land a little in case you didn't come. I don't doubt you, not for a minute, but you might talk in your sleep."

He struck inland, leading the way as if he had been brought up on the ground. After ten minutes' walking he began to go slower, and to peer about anxiously from side to side. Suddenly he gave an exclamation of relief, and, walking a few paces to one side, stopped on the brink of a small dry pit in which grew a single stunted thorn bush. They descended the shallow sloping side and threw down their tools by the bush; without a word Timms knew by instinct that this was the place, and that the critical moment had arrived. "Which side?" he whispered; his voice seemed to have left him.

Elgood shook his head. "It has the same looks from every side," he muttered. Now that they were actually on the spot, the whole quest seemed much more hopeless and ridiculous than it had even in the full light of day. Without another word they threw off their coats, and both began to dig a yard from the tree, and on different sides. The ground was hard, and every now and then an obstructing root made it necessary to bring the mattocks into play. For nearly an hour they dug on in silence, so absorbed in their work that they did not notice the dark figures that silently approached and stood on the edge of the pit, all round, watching them, so

that when a voice suddenly called out, "You are surrounded my lads; it's not worth while making a fight for it!" the shock was horrible, and for a moment they seemed to cease living. Elgood was the first to recover himself. "Who are you?" he cried. "What do you want?"

"I'm Bill Bristow, if you don't know me," replied the voice, "head keeper for Mrs. Winton, Lady of the Manor. And where are you from? You aren't moor men."

It did not take long for the two adventurers to convince the keeper and his men that they were not poachers, but the circumstances did not lend themselves to a plausible explanation of their motives for being on the moor at that time of night. Still less were they disposed to divulge the secret of the Spanish treasure. Under these circumstances, Bristow ordered his men to march their prisoners to the Lady of the Manor, who was anxiously awaiting news of the result of the raid that had been planned on the information that a gang of poachers would be out that night.

Mrs. Winton was in the habit of exercising a somewhat magisterial authority in all matters connected with her estate. She stood with folded arms, and wearing an expression of mixed severity and judicial calm, when the two unfortunate men were brought into her presence. The sombreness of her costume of dark dress and black India lace shawl enhanced the frigidness of her appearance. By this time Elgood had come to the conclusion that the only possible way out of the predicament was to explain the true object of the expedition. Mrs. Winton listened to his story with scorn, but with evident relief.

"I can quite accept your tale," she said, "because I have a weak-witted fellow in my employ who is forever

babbling about a buried treasure somewhere else. Eh, Land?"

The man addressed looked down sheepishly. "It be common talk hereabouts, and was so in grandfeyther's time, that there be hundreds of pounds of gold buried under the ruins of old Carston House, higher up the Channel," he said.

Elgood started and looked at Timms. The same thought struck them both: Had they been sent mysteriously down here to learn a local legend, that would otherwise never have reached them? Was there really a treasure after all, and that at their very doors?

The voice of Mrs. Winton recalled them to their surroundings; she was formally discharging them, with no worse a stain to their names than the presumption of mental weakness. They were once more free to pursue their chimera, and just eight hours after first setting out, they again weighed anchor and beat up the Channel.

If the affairs of William Elgood were not progressing altogether satisfactorily abroad, he would have had still more occasion for annoyance could he have witnessed the sequence of events that his absence brought about at home. Hardly had the *Nymph* cleared the harbour before Eustace Vernon—how informed of his opportunity I cannot pretend to know—walked openly along the lane that bounds one side of the garden around Carston Cottage. It happened at that moment that Letty was coming from the house, wearing her prettiest dress, to get some flowers. Now the real gist of William Elgood's remarks to Vernon, divested of much that was superfluous padding—but not on that account calculated to break their force—on that memorable occasion referred to at the beginning of this narrative, was to the effect that the artist was never to enter the grounds of Carson Cottage again. Letty would not have dreamed of disobeying her.

father; at the same time she could not wilfully hurt the feelings of anyone—she walked out into the lane.

"You haven't your easel," she said, after they had shaken hands; and then she stopped and wished she had said anything but that: it was so reminiscent.

Vernon did not appear to notice anything.

"No," he replied, "I came just for a last look; I have to go back to-morrow."

Letty did not say anything. Everything she could think of, every commonplace that arose in her mind, seemed to lead back to that last dreadful interview. In silence they walked on, and presently found themselves standing by the ruins that formed the ostensible reason of Vernon's visits.

"Do you know," said the artist at length, "there seems to be very little that one can learn about this place? There is not enough left to tempt the antiquarians, and the country people seem to have no traditions at all. Yet it was an important stronghold two or three hundred years ago, and held out bravely against Cromwell."

"Yes," said the girl, "that is all that we know of it, almost. I believe that our cottage is built from its stones. Nobody seems to own the place; only a few weeks ago a neighbour of ours took away whole cartloads of earth and stones to use in his garden and in making a wall; when they were digging they found a curious old silver ring; see, here it is."

Vernon took the clumsy silver band, and scrutinised the inner side closely. "There has been a motto," he said, "but it is all worn away except the "ing" of the word 'King.' "

"Oh, let me look," said the girl eagerly. "I did not know that there was anything there."

Vernon handed it back, but his fingers trembled as they touched hers, and the ring fell to the ground, then it

rolled a little way and disappeared in the crevice between two large flat stones that lay half buried in the earth.

"How clumsy of me!" said Vernon, apologetically; "wait a minute, there are some tools here." He brought a crowbar and, placing it between the stones, raised one a little way, but the hold was not sufficient, and it fell back again. As it struck the ground the two looked at one another in astonishment, for the sound it gave forth was hollow and almost uncanny. Vernon tried again, and this time raised the stone, completely throwing it over. He struck the bar into the earth beneath, and the noise was repeated, while the bar encountered some hard substance at the depth of only a few inches. "Oh, do dig," cried Letty keenly. "I am sure there's something there;" she had quite forgotten the silver ring till Vernon picked it up and restored it to her.

The removal of a few shovelfuls of earth revealed an iron-studded board, which was obviously the lid of a box. After a little more digging and work with the bar the chest was raised from its bed amid breathless excitement. It proved to be small, but very strong, heavily clamped with iron bands and secured by three locks. "Do break it open!" said Letty excitedly—she was almost dancing round it. "I'm dying to see what's inside!"

"Do you know," said Vernon, who was inwardly little calmer than she was, "it's very curious. Under ordinary circumstances, I suppose that we ought to take it to some authorities, but I really believe that it's mine."

"Of course it is," said Letty convincingly; "you found it."

"Ah, but apart from that. Look here!"—he pulled an antique ring from his finger—"you see that?"

"Yes," she said; "a lion on its hind legs, and a—a sort of curly thing underneath. What of it?"

He pointed to the metal shield in the centre of the lid. "Oh," she cried rapturously, "another just like it! But you," she demanded, after a moment's reflection, "who are you?"

"I am Eustace Vernon," he replied smiling, "and nothing more."

"And this?" pointing to the crest on the box.

"That was Stephen Vernon, I suppose; my eighth great-grandfather, and third Baron Carston."

Letty had become quiet again—her excitement suddenly gone: "Oh, I thought you were just an artist, and quite poor!" she almost whispered.

"Dear one," he said, taking her hand, "I am nothing more. When my ancestor lost his life at Naseby his young children were left poor and almost friendless. They were brought up by the peasants as themselves, and became yeoman. The title was dropped, and has never been used since; as for this box—why, if you are afraid of it, let us bury it unopened!"

"No, Eustace," she replied, with a happy smile, "let us open it first, and then bury it if necessary."

. . . . . .

Just as Elgood and the captain of the *Nymph* were leaving the quay, some few hours later, they suddenly encountered Eustace Vernon, who was carrying a hand bag, and followed by a porter groaning under the weight of an exceedingly well corded, brown-paper package. Elgood had quite recovered his spirits, and was looking forward with certainty to the discovery of the treasure towards which he had been so fatefully guided. He could afford to be disinterested now that the artist was obviously leaving the place, and in a burst of generous forgiveness he shook him by the hand and wished him a pleasant journey. It was not until the following morning, just as he was about to commence active digging

operations, that the contents of a letter, in Vernon's hand-writing, caused him to recollect the exceedingly good terms on which that gentleman seemed to be with himself. For a moment it seemed as though the emotions of the forecastle would gain the ascendancy, but even from the first they were tempered by the conviction that there is a vast difference between an impecunious artist and the thirteenth Baron Carston and Hereditary Keeper of the Royal Demesne, especially when the latter has just discovered the family gold and jewels; so that in the end the paternal feelings triumphed, and two days later saw Vernon established within the shadow of his ancestral home.

This happy consummation leaves only one person badly used—Mr. Timms, to wit, who is still threatening to "have the law on" most of the principals of this history.

Muswell Hill, 1896.

XXI

From a London Balcony

THE balcony runs the whole length of the terrace, and by its several stages of decrepitude serviceably indicates the prosperity of the occupants. In several places it is gay with hanging plants and festoons of creepers; in others neglected, unpainted, and falling to pieces. Years ago fair ladies and brave men found it a charming vantage-point to sit and gossip and flirt, or watch their neighbours while "taking the air." Below, the iron stanchions still remain where hung the swinging lanthorns which threw an uncertain glimmer over voluptuous sedans or stately carriages. That was before civilisation swept further west, and before the people of the Square were content and even proud to describe their neighbourhood as "quite respectable."

All the houses are large and uniform, but none who could afford the rent would ever dream of living there unless, as they say, "there was something coming back." In most cases this resolves itself into the letting of apartments; it is the easiest way.

There is little traffic in the Square, and its quietness is mentioned as a particular recommendation. As the night deepens, there are strange sounds to be heard, and strange sights to be seen from the balcony. The sounds are the weirdest, for often they are inexplicable and insoluble; just haunting. Lately a little child lost itself —so someone said—and its incessant cries rang out like the bleating of a strayed lamb. Not a window was

thrown up, not a door opened; it was nothing. Presently the policeman came his round, and took it away.

My balcony enjoys a happy mean. There are no flowers, nothing fancy about it, but it is painted, like the rest of the house, once every three years. The house on the left is dingy and jealous. The balcony there is latticed all round, and on the roof, high above, two jagged *chevaux-de-frise* mark the boundaries. The house on the right seems ordinary and commonplace. At certain and regular hours the door opens, and a white-haired lady, leaning heavily on a gold-headed stick, walks out and across the road into the garden beyond. She has a kind, benevolent face; a face that instinctively inspires confidence and trust. No one else ever seems to leave the house, but on a sunny afternoon a light-haired girl may occasionally be seen for a moment, hanging a caged goldfinch out or watering the ferns and plants.

To the friendless, aimless man there is a humanising fascination in idly watching the meaningless trivialities of the little world around him. In piecing together the casual incidents and building upon the passing commonplaces he loses his oppressing sense of utter loneliness, and invests his neighbour with an interest of comedy or tragedy as may seem most appropriate. A passing word, an intercepted smile, a shrinking look, each becomes the key to a chapter of romance and contributes to the unreal creation of his imagination.

In this way I had come to take an interest in the silver-haired lady next door, and assigned to her the *rôle* of fairy godmother, and pictured her as a benevolent intervener in the destinies of numerous *protégés*. One evening this imaginative conceit was strengthened by a pretty incident. I was on the balcony, watching the white light of the evening pale into a faint opal dusk, when a cab rumbled along the road below me,

and stopped at the next house. First of all my fairy godmother alighted, slowly, as all her actions were, and then followed the veritable Cinderella of my fancy. Cinderella just from the fields and monotonous toil, with her eyes shining out to the first mad glamour of London town; Cinderella, in poor, coarse dress, with the face of an angel and the form of a perfect woman.

For a few minutes she stood there, watching her corded wood box being lifted down, while her companion walked slowly into the house, and—in my imagination—stood waiting in the hall with a welcome when the girl rejoined her.

Whether it was that after the new arrival I began to notice the house on the right more closely than before, or whether other people also had gone in, I cannot say, but certainly from that time I grew conscious of new and unascribable sounds and incidents. Through the open window came the frequent sounds of voices in dispute, a voice in tears and entreaty, and a hard, coarse female voice—utterly irreconcilable with anyone I had seen—raised in threats and anger. I came to the absolute certainty that the house was occupied by more than one set of people.

The houses are substantial and the partitions thick, for they were built at a Georgian period, when ugliness and solidity were alike aimed at. But one night there came a knocking at the wall on the right that no amount of brick and mortar could quite deaden. It was the mad beating of two clenched hands, like the dashing of the wings of a newly-caged bird against the wires of its prison. I flung open a window and stepped out. At the same moment a door in the next room slammed, the light went out, and all was still. From one balcony to another is only a step; but what can one do? What but to shrug one's shoulders, and go back in again.

. . . . . .

With the vibration of a piercing shriek still ringing through my brain, I jumped out of bed and to the window at a bound.

Where do the people come from at such moments? I could not have been more than a couple of seconds, but already there were half-a-dozen collected round outside.

Ugh! it was too ghastly. There on the horrid spiked railings twenty feet below——

I turned sick and faint, and I, at the moment, had not the nerve even to look at what a desperate woman had dared to do.

They lifted her off, and put her gently down on the cold flags in the grey, early morning. They reverently straightened her limbs, and closed her eyes, and drew back her dabbled black hair; and presently they carried her in.

For weeks after, no matter how muddy the road might be, people stepped off the path to avoid crossing those stains.

It must have been terribly distressing to the people in the house. They left almost immediately; but I saw the white-haired lady only yesterday at Paddington. She was talking to a very pretty girl, and she looked as nice and sympathetic as ever.

As for the house, it is still empty. Such houses do not readily let.

Bloomsbury, 1894.

THE END